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ABSTRACT

This report details what happened in Philadelphia's middle schools during the Children Achieving reform effort, a comprehensive, one-size-fits-all reform project. Based on research of the program over a 5-year period, the paper explains why reforms fell short of their intended outcomes. The critical levers for change were content standards, the accountability system, and decentralization. Content standards, as examined here, outlined the knowledge and skills that Philadelphia students should acquire. Initially, Children Achieving did not articulate a particular vision or set of recommended practices, preferring that neighborhood clusters, local schools, and small learning communities customize educational practices to meet the needs of their students and harness the resources of their communities. Surveys showed that each level of schooling--elementary, middle, and high school--demanded customized strategies for improvement. Each level had different organizational issues, professional norms, and cultures that needed to be addressed. Reform leaders failed to craft strategies that accounted for different levels of schooling and varying capacities of teachers and schools. It was not enough to specify the ends, and the initial lack of guidance regarding curriculum and pedagogy resulted in the widespread use of test-preparation materials that were not integrated with the standards or the envisioned classroom curricula. Appended are tables on the Profile of Five Middle Schools in the Intensive Qualitative Sample, 1999-2000. (Contains 13 tables.) (RJM)

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Powerful Ideas, Modest Gains: Five Years of Systemic Reform in Philadelphia Middle Schools

Jolley Bruce Christman, Research for Action

December 2001

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ABOUT THE CHILDREN ACHIEVING CHALLENGE

In February 1995 shortly after the School Board of Philadelphia adopted *Children Achieving* as a systemic reform agenda to improve the Philadelphia public schools, the Annenberg Foundation designated Philadelphia as one of a few American cities to receive a five-year $50 million Annenberg Challenge grant to improve public education.

Among the conditions for receiving the grant was a requirement to raise two matching dollars ($100 million over five years) for each one received from the Annenberg Foundation and to create an independent management structure to provide program, fiscal, and evaluation oversight of the grant. In Philadelphia, a business organization, Greater Philadelphia First, assumed this responsibility, and with it, the challenge of building and sustaining civic support for the improvement of public education in the city.

Philadelphia's *Children Achieving* was a sweeping systemic reform initiative. Systemic reform eschews a school-by-school approach to reform and relies on coherent policy, improved coordination of resources and services, content and performance standards, decentralization of decision-making, and accountability mechanisms to transform entire school systems. Led by a dynamic superintendent and central office personnel, *Children Achieving* was the first attempt by an urban district to test systemic reform in practice.

EVALUATION OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING

In 1996 the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) at the University of Pennsylvania and its partner, Research for Action (RFA) were charged by the *Children Achieving* Challenge with the evaluation of *Children Achieving*. Between the 1995-1996 and 2000-2001 school years, CPRE and RFA researchers interviewed hundreds of teachers, principals, parents, students, District officials, and civic leaders; sat in on meetings where the plan was designed, debated, and revised; observed its implementation in classrooms and schools; conducted two system-wide surveys of teachers; and carried out independent analyses of the District's test results and other indicators of system performance. An outline of the research methods used by CPRE and RFA is included in this report. A listing of the reports on *Children Achieving* currently available from CPRE is found below. There will be several additional reports released in the coming months. New reports will be listed and available as they are released on the CPRE web site at www.cpre.org.

CHILDREN ACHIEVING'S THEORY OF ACTION

To assess the progress and effects of a comprehensive reform such as *Children Achieving*, it is essential to understand its "theory of action," that is, the assumptions made about what actions or behaviors will produce the desired effects. A summary of the *Children Achieving* theory of action follows:

Given high academic standards and strong incentives to focus their efforts and resources; more control over school resource allocations, organization, policies, and programs; adequate funding and resources; more hands-on leadership and high-quality support; better coordination of resources and programs; schools restructured to support good teaching and encourage improvement of practice; rich professional development of their own choosing; and increased public understanding and support; the teachers and administrators of the Philadelphia schools will develop, adopt, or adapt instructional technologies and patterns of behavior that will help all children reach the District's high standards.

ADDITIONAL READING ON CHILDREN ACHIEVING

The following publications on the evaluation of the *Children Achieving* are currently available through CPRE at (215) 573-0700, or email your requests to cpre@gse.upenn.edu.

- Recruiting and Retaining Teachers: Keys to Improving the Philadelphia Public Schools (May 2001)
- School Leadership and Reform: Case Studies of Philadelphia Principals (May 2001)
- Contradictions and Control in Systemic Reform: The Ascendancy of the Central Office in Philadelphia Schools (August 2001)
- Clients, Consumers, or Collaborators? Parents and their Roles in School Reform During *Children Achieving*, 1995-2000 (August 2001)
- Powerful Ideas, Modest Gains: Five Years of Systemic Reform in Philadelphia Middle Schools (December 2001)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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CHILDREN ACHIEVING EVALUATION 1995-2001: RESEARCH METHODS

During the past five years, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Research for Action used the research methods indicated below in their evaluation of the *Children Achieving* Challenge.

1. 1996-2000 school-level data on indicators that made up the District's Performance Responsibility Index including student scores on the SAT-9, student promotion and graduation rates, student attendance, and teacher attendance.

2. Two census surveys of teachers, the first in 1997 and the second in 1999. Teachers were asked about reform implementation, school conditions, and teaching practices. There was a greater than 60 percent response rate on both surveys.

3. School indicators describing teacher and student characteristics in 1996 and 1999 obtained from the School District of Philadelphia's Information Services. These data included school enrollment, number of teachers, the proportion of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, among other indicators. These data were used for descriptive purposes and in hierarchical linear and logistic regression models to help understand the relationships among reform implementation, student outcomes, and school characteristics.

4. Five years (1995-1996 through 1999-2000) of qualitative research in 49 schools (26 elementary, 11 middle, and 12 high schools) in 14 clusters. Qualitative research included: interviews of teachers, principals, parents, outside partners who worked in the schools, and in a few cases, students; observations of classrooms, SLC meetings, professional development sessions, and school leadership team meetings; and review of school documents (School Improvement Plan, budget, etc.). Intensive, multi-year case study research in a subset of 25 schools (13 elementary, five middle, and seven high schools).

5. Interviews of central office and cluster staff and observations of meetings and other events.

6. Interviews of 40 Philadelphia civic leaders (included political leaders, leaders in the funding community, public education advocates, journalists, and business leaders).

In addition, numerous other studies conducted during *Children Achieving* informed this evaluation. These included: Bruce Wilson and Dick Corbett's three-year interview study of middle school students; an evaluation of the Philadelphia Urban Systemic Initiative in Mathematics and Science conducted by Research for Action; the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study conducted by Frank Furstenberg at the University of Pennsylvania; and

INTRODUCTION

Turning Points, the 1989 report issued by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, described a mismatch between the developmental needs and interests of 10- to 14-year-old students and their schools. It called for interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction that promoted connections with the real world, challenged students to develop rigorous critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, and was more responsive to their developmental concerns.[1] Middle schools should address the developmental changes young adolescents experience: developing a personal identity, finding a respected place with peers, and negotiating adult expectations and changes in their families and communities. They should emphasize students as active learners with emerging intellectual interests.[2] This became the framework for middle school reform in the nation, and in Philadelphia.

But recently, middle schools have come under fire for attending more readily to students' social and emotional needs than their intellectual ones.[3] Today middle schools across the nation face a major challenge: how do they provide social and emotional supports for young adolescents at an important juncture in their development, while offering a demanding curriculum that engages them and develops their ability to think critically?

Beginning in 1995, Philadelphia's systemic reform effort, *Children Achieving*, aimed to raise academic standards, not just for the city's early adolescents, but for all students. Its architects aimed to demonstrate that every student could achieve proficiency in the three core subject areas of mathematics, reading, and science by 2008. The *Children Achieving* reform plan offered major reforms affecting all aspects of the School District's work. In the words of then-Superintendent David Hornbeck, *Children Achieving* would do it "all at once" and at all grade levels, pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. With $150 million from the Annenberg Challenge, the business community, and local foundations, *Children Achieving* was broad in its scope and ambitious in its goals.

In theory, the *Children Achieving* reform plan appeared to be a good match for what ailed Philadelphia's middle schools. Its core beliefs — results matter, all students can achieve at high levels, and low expectations of students have contributed to consistently low achievement levels in urban schools — focused attention on student academic achievement. But in practice, the reforms produced modest gains for middle grades students in reading and science and made limited headway in addressing the abysmally low achievement of students in mathematics. This report details what

[1] Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1989.

[2] P.S. George, C. Stevenson, J. Thomason, and J. Beane, *The middle school and beyond*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1992.

[3] A.W. Jackson and G.A. Davis, *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000.

SIDEBAR 1. CHILDREN ACHIEVING: CRITICAL DRIVERS OF CHANGE, CORE BELIEFS, AND KEY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Critical Drivers of Change

- Standards
- Accountability
- Decentralization

Core Beliefs

- Results matter.
- All students can achieve at high levels. It is the job of schools to provide students with rigorous curriculum, excellent instruction, and the support they need to meet high standards.
- External incentives and sanctions will induce teachers and school administrators to focus on student achievement and to adopt the practices and exert the effort needed to improve student learning.
- Teachers should be free to choose their own instructional methods and curricula, as long as their students make progress toward meeting the new standards.
- Many aspects of the system must be changed simultaneously in order to produce better results.

Key Support Systems

- Guidance from clusters*
- Curriculum Frameworks
- Professional development
- Student and family support

* Clusters were the 22 regional subdivisions of neighborhood schools and the administrative offices that managed them.

happened in middle schools during the *Children Achieving* reform effort and explains why reforms fell short of their intended outcomes. It is based on research conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education and Research for Action over a five-year period.*

Children Achieving was designed to be a comprehensive, one-size-fits-all reform. The critical levers for change in *Children Achieving's* theory of action were content standards, the accountability system, and decentralization. Content standards outlined the knowledge and skills that Philadelphia students should acquire. The accountability system annually assessed schools' performance and rewarded progress or sanctioned decline every two years. Decentralization established new organizational structures — clusters, local school councils, and small learning communities — that moved instructional decision-making closer to neighborhoods, schools, and classrooms.

Initially, *Children Achieving* did not articulate a particular vision or set of recommended practices for elementary, middle, and high schools. Neighborhood clusters, local schools, and small learning communities (schools within schools) were expected to customize educational practices to meet the needs of their students and to use the resources of their communities. *Children Achieving* did, however, devise new support systems and

* See pp. ix-x for a description of the research methods.

organizational arrangements to help schools implement the standards and meet their performance targets. These new arrangements included:

- Expanded professional development for teachers led by cluster-based Teaching and Learning Network staff;
- Curriculum Frameworks developed by central administration in the spring of 1997 in response to teachers' requests for more curriculum guidance; and
- Supports for students and their families coordinated by the Family Resource Network.

An important finding of our overall evaluation is that each level of schooling — elementary, middle, and high schools — demanded customized strategies for improvement. Each level had different organizational issues, professional norms, and cultures that needed to be addressed. The intellectual and social-emotional needs of students were different at each level. In this report we assess the *Children Achieving* theory of action and its suitability for a middle school context, the implementation of the reform in middle schools, and the key successes and challenges. The major questions that guided our evaluation study emerged from *Children Achieving's* theory of action were:

- What progress did Philadelphia middle school students make during the five years of the *Children Achieving* Challenge?
- What perceptions did middle school teachers and principals have of their schools, their students, and the *Children Achieving* reforms? How did their perceptions shape their school improvement efforts during the five years of the *Children Achieving* Challenge?
- What steps did middle schools take to improve educational practices and to raise student achievement? What range of organizational behaviors did middle schools adopt, and how do we account for that range?
- How did *Children Achieving* influence improvement efforts in middle schools?

SIDEBAR 2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN PHILADELPHIA

By 1988-1989, Philadelphia had established 32 middle schools serving either fifth or sixth through eighth grades, and only five junior high schools remained. About half of the Philadelphia middle schools contained smaller units, called houses. A study by the School District's research office[5] praised the middle school house plan and reported that the promotion rate for Chapter I-eligible students in middle schools with house structures "was well above the promotion rate in middle schools without house plans."[6] In 1999, a total of 42 Philadelphia middle schools served approximately 36,800 students with an ethnic breakdown of approximately 69 percent African American, 14 percent White, 14 percent Latino, and 3.5 percent Asian. Eighty-five percent of the students enrolled in Philadelphia middle schools were living in poverty.[7]

In 1993, PATHS/PRISM (the predecessor to the Philadelphia Education Fund) launched a middle school renewal initiative. It had the dual goals of supporting individual school improvement and creating a District-wide conversation about middle schools that would draw on the burgeoning national debate over middle grades education. Despite these efforts to develop effective middle schools, the District still had not articulated a guiding vision or a set of recommended practices for middle grades education when David Hornbeck became Superintendent in 1994.[8]

Many people were beginning to raise questions about the desirability of the middle school organization in light of data suggesting that students who attended K-8 schools were more successful academically than their peers in middle schools. Superintendent Hornbeck joined this chorus of speculation, but took no action to restructure the schools in spite of information from the District's Office of Accountability and Assessment that confirmed previous research that showed that, as a group, K-8 schools are more effective than middle schools. Following the Superintendent's departure, the future of middle schools in Philadelphia remained in question. The District's Empowerment Plan, written in the summer of 2000 as a response to state legislation to take over districts where large numbers of children are failing, calls for restructuring poorly-performing middle schools into K-8 schools.

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[5] N.J. McGinley, *Middle school organization and scheduling*. Philadelphia: School District of Philadelphia, 1988.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Most recent statistics available come from 1999. Numbers do not add up to 100 due to rounding. Racial and ethnic categories used come from the School District of Philadelphia definitions and are not the choice of the author.

[8] J.B. Christman and E. Simon, Personal correspondence to Richard Clark, 1993.

SKETCHES OF REFORM

In this report, we draw on data from a total of 11 middle schools where we conducted interviews and observations during our five-year evaluation. Five of these schools were part of more intensive, multi-year case study research. Throughout this report, we offer sketches of what happened in these five schools during the *Children Achieving* reform to give a sense of the progress that they did and did not make toward becoming organizations capable of supporting both teachers as they adopted challenging new instructional practices and students as they stretched to reach higher standards of achievement.

Clearly, standards, accountability, and decentralization did not have the intended impacts in all of these schools. Schools offer very different contexts in which reforms can take root and grow. Each school brings its own history with change and its own level of organizational capacity for engaging with and effectively implementing the ideas of the reforms. Slavin[9] argues that the internal conditions of a school predict its readiness for change. He identifies three categories of schools: "Seed" schools which have extraordinary capacity for adopting and adapting new ideas; "Brick" schools which want to improve, but need direction, tools, and ongoing support; and "Sand" schools which are chaotic. The latter are characterized by incompetent or transitional leadership, a reduction of resources, poor relationships, and which lack the basic ingredients for positive change.

The five schools described in this report showed varied stages of readiness for reform. Some were able to engage constructively with *Children Achieving*, still, others made little progress. These vignettes were created by a research team that included: Jolley Bruce Christman, Ellen Foley, Theresa Luhm, Claire Passantino, Rhonda Mordecai Phillips, Guadalupe Rivera, Elaine Simon, Susan Watson, and Hitoshi Yoshida.

[9] R.E. Slavin, *Sand, bricks, and seeds: School change strategies and readiness for reform*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, 1995

ABBOTT MIDDLE SCHOOL VIGNETTE: SUSTAINED INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT, STEADY PERFORMANCE GAINS

Student Attendance: Percent of students attending 90 percent of days or more in 1996 and 85 percent of days or more in 2000

	1996	2000
Abbott Middle School	79.9	78.1
Middle School Average	69.2	72.0

Staff Attendance: Percent of staff attending 95 percent of days or more

	1996	2000
Abbott Middle School	72.7	67.0
Middle School Average	52.1	58.4

Promotion Rate: (in percents)

	1996	2000
Abbott Middle School	87.3	99.6
Middle School Average	81.5	94.9

Students' SAT-9 scores at or above basic	1996	2000
Reading	45.3	51.8
Math	8.5	19.8
Science	16.4	32.4

Abbott Middle School had an enrollment of 1,100 students; 87 percent were from low-income backgrounds. The student population reflected a racially and ethnically diverse community: 48 percent Latino, 12 percent Asian, 29 percent African American, and 11 percent White. In 1994-1995, Abbott adopted a national whole-school reform model that offered a core curriculum and professional development for teachers. During the course of *Children Achieving*, the school had four principals, all of whom continued affiliation with the national reform model. Many of Abbott's teachers assumed leadership roles within the school and District. Over the course of *Children Achieving*, the faculty of Abbott Middle School worked consistently to improve instruction and student achievement increased in all subject areas. The school made good use of external resources — an IBM technology grant, a grant from the Philadelphia Urban Systemic Initiative, and technical assistance offered by the cluster's Teaching and Learning Network staff — to support its instructional priorities. At the same time, staff ignored elements of the District reforms that they felt were distractions. For example, small learning community teachers did not develop and implement thematic curricula. Instead, each small learning community focused on strengthening the core curriculum. The local school council also played an important role in the school's success, particularly in selecting new principals who built upon previous improvement efforts rather than pursuing entirely new reform agendas.

AN OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS DURING *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*

THE PROGRESS OF STUDENTS

The progress of Philadelphia schools is measured by an accountability system implemented in 1995-1996 as part of the *Children Achieving* reform agenda, called the Professional Responsibility Index (PRI). The PRI measures school progress in two-year increments toward specific performance targets. The Index takes into account not only standardized test scores and test participation rates, but promotion and persistence rates, and student and staff attendance.

As part of the Performance Index, Philadelphia introduced a new achievement test, the Stanford-9 Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9) in 1996. The criterion-referenced test measured math, reading, and science in grades 4, 8, and 11, and categorized the scores as Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. It incorporated both open-ended and multiple-choice response formats. The open-ended writing tasks and problem-based questions were a significant departure from previous standardized measures used in the District. The same form of the test was given each year.

During the course of *Children Achieving*, middle school students made moderate achievement gains on the SAT-9. Steady and encouraging growth occurred in reading between 1996 and 1998, as the percentage of students scoring at or above Basic increased from 43.3 percent in 1996 to 58.5 percent in 1999. But in 2000, eighth grade student performance in reading dropped slightly to 55.8 percent of students scoring at or above Basic.

When *Children Achieving* was launched, eighth grade student achievement in mathematics was extremely low and improving test scores proved very difficult. In 1996, only 15.7 percent of middle school students scored at or above Basic in math. Although this proportion rose to 25.2 percent in 1998, math scores declined slightly in both 1999, when 22.6 percent of middle school students performed at or about Basic, and in 2000 when 23.2 percent of middle school students performed at or above Basic.

Middle school students made their greatest gains in science. In 1996, only 18.1 percent of students scored at or above Basic in science, but by 2000 the proportion had increased to 27.4 percent. The largest gain in science, by far, was in the first year of the reform.

When *Children Achieving* was initiated, middle school students were less likely than elementary students to be performing at the Basic level or above on the SAT-9. This did not change over the course of the reform. In fact, between 1996 and 2000 middle school students' gains on the SAT-9 were not

TABLE 1. SAT-9 GAINS BETWEEN 1996-2000*

	Elementary School Level	Middle School Level	High School Level
Reading Scores			
1996 at or above basic	40.4	43.3	25.5
2000 at or above basic	57.7	55.8	40.7
Overall change 1996-2000 in percent at or above basic	17.3	15.5	15.2
Math Scores			
1996 at or above basic	32.2	15.7	11.6
2000 at or above basic	49.1	23.2	16.4
Overall change 1996-2000 in percent at or above basic	16.9	7.5	4.8
Science Scores			
1996 at or above basic	37.1	18.1	4.9
2000 at or above basic	61.5	27.4	19.1
Overall change 1996-2000 in percent at or above basic	24.4	9.3	14.2

** Does not include K-8 schools.*

as strong as the gains of elementary school students. On the other hand, when the test was first administered in 1996, middle school students performed at higher levels than high school students. Over the course of the reform, middle and high school students made roughly comparable increases, except in reading, where high school students made greater gains.

In addition to SAT-9 scores, school progress in Philadelphia was also measured by promotion and persistence rates, and student and staff attendance. Middle school students made modest gains on these other performance indicators. The percentage of middle school students with 85 percent or higher attendance rates increased slightly from 70 to 72 percent from 1996 to 2000. The percentage of middle school teachers attending 95 percent or more days increased from 52.1 to 58.4 percent from 1996 to 2000.

Promotion rates also increased over the five years of the *Children Achieving* reform initiative. While 81.5 percent of middle school students were promoted to the next grade level in 1996, by 2000, the promotion rate had increased to 94.9 percent. On the surface, these promotion data appear promising. A larger percentage of students passed sufficient courses to be promoted to the next grade. However, other data suggest a more complex picture of middle school promotion rates. In their longitudinal study of a random sample of students who were eighth graders in 1995-1996, Neild and Weiss[10] found that

[10] R.C. Neild and C.C. Weiss, *Philadelphia education longitudinal study (PELS): Report on the transition to high school in the school district of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund, 1999.

TABLE 2. AVERAGE FINAL GRADES IN EIGHTH AND NINTH GRADES FOR ALL COURSES FOR PELS NINTH GRADE STUDENTS

Grade Range	Percent of Eighth Grade Students	Percent of Ninth Grade Students
A (90-100)	6	4
B (80-89)	36	17
C (70-79)	41	32
D (65-69)	10	15
F (64 and below)	7	32
n =	2,823	2,782

Source: *The Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study* (1999).

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF COURSES FAILED IN EIGHTH AND NINTH GRADE FOR PELS STUDENTS

Number of Courses Failed	Percent of Eighth Grade Students Failing	Percent of Ninth Grade Students Failing
0	64	42
1	14	17
2	7	10
3 or more	15	31
n =	2,823	2,782

"most students' grades were very low in the first year of high school, much lower than they were in eighth grade."[11] Tables 2 and 3 show the disparity between these students' eighth and ninth grade performance. Neild and Weiss write:

Examining the number of courses failed tells a similar story of extraordinary decline in academic performance between eighth and ninth grade. Table [2] presents a comparison of the number of courses failed by PELS students [those in the 1999 Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study] in eighth and ninth grade. The proportion of students passing all of their courses was much greater in eighth grade. Just under two-thirds of students passed all of their classes in eighth grade; in ninth grade, however, only 42 percent failed no courses. [See Table 3.] More striking is the rise in the number of students who failed three or more courses. In eighth grade, 15 percent of students failed at least three of their courses. In ninth grade, in contrast, 31 percent failed at such a level. In sum, the data shown in Tables [2] and [3] show that although poor performance and course failure are not unknown in eighth grade, substantially more students experience serious academic difficulties in high school.[12]

[11] Ibid, p. 4.

[12] Ibid, p. 34.

We hypothesize that three factors may have contributed to the discrepancy between students' report card marks in eighth and ninth grade. The first is that middle school teachers may have held students to a lower standard because they wanted to boost promotion rates and thus their school's score on the Performance Responsibility Index. Second, teachers did not want to create a situation in which there were overage students in their schools. And the third is that the transition to high school can have a disastrous effect on the promotion rates of students who were performing reasonably well in middle school.

As discussed in the introduction to this report, *Children Achieving* aimed to prove that all Philadelphia students could achieve proficiency in the three core subject areas of mathematics, reading, and science by 2008. The District planned to begin phasing in new graduation and promotion requirements in the spring of 2000. To be promoted to ninth grade, eighth graders were required to get a passing grade in all major subjects (previously, students had to pass three of their four major subjects) and successfully complete a multidisciplinary project. By 2001, the District hoped to implement an additional promotion standard that would require students to score at least at Below Basic 3 on the SAT-9 in order to be promoted. (Because of the large cohort of students falling in the Below Basic category, the District defined three levels of Below Basic scores to gain a more precise breakdown of student achievement.) But, when the District could not afford to offer summer school to failing eighth grade students, the Board of Education voted to postpone implementation of the new promotion standards.

An exploratory study of the effects of the new promotion policy, conducted by Research for Action, found that had the new requirements for promotion into ninth grade been implemented in 1999-2000, only 37 percent of all Philadelphia middle school students would have met them without remediation. The outcomes were worse for historically under-served students. Only 31 percent of African American students, 35 percent of Latino students, 29 percent of low-income students, and less than 10 percent of students categorized as learning disabled would have met the promotion requirements without remediation.[13]

In summary, between 1996 and 2000, Philadelphia middle school students made modest progress in all subject areas, but performance in mathematics remained low. Middle school students performed less well and made lower gains than elementary students. They performed somewhat better than high school students and with comparable gains. Attendance improved slightly and there was a marked increase in the promotion rate. Our research shows how ambitious the goals of the reform were in relation to students' actual achievement on the SAT-9.

[13] T. Abu El Haj, J.B. Christman, E. Foley, and R. Rolon-Dow, *Students, teachers, and high standards reforms: Negotiation education policy, classroom practice, and student outcomes in Philadelphia middle schools*. Philadelphia: Research for Action, 2000.

BAKER MIDDLE SCHOOL VIGNETTE: NEW MOMENTUM FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT, LIMITED PERFORMANCE GAINS

Student Attendance: Percent of students attending 90 percent of days or more in 1996 and 85 percent of days or more in 2000

	1996	2000
Baker Middle School	72.8	71.2
Middle School Average	69.2	72.0

Promotion Rate: (in percents)

	1996	2000
Baker Middle School	84.6	97.3
Middle School Average	81.5	94.9

Staff Attendance: Percent of staff attending 95 percent of days or more

	1996	2000
Baker Middle School	64.0	61.2
Middle School Average	52.1	58.4

Students' SAT-9 scores at or above basic	1996	2000
Reading	47.5	48.1
Math	14.1	12.6
Science	16.7	24.1

Baker Middle School enrolled approximately 1,000 students, 90 percent from low-income families. The student body was 80 percent African American, 12 percent Asian, and 7 percent Latino. During the first two years of *Children Achieving*, Baker Middle School deteriorated under weak administrative leadership and the loss of many veteran faculty. The school did not meet its performance targets for the first accountability cycle and was identified as a low-progress school. In 1997, a new principal arrived, determined to turn the school around. She enlisted a strong leadership team and implemented multiple reform initiatives: project-based learning to actively engage students in their education, family groups to provide each student with an adult mentor, adoption of the same whole-school reform design that had guided Abbott School's efforts, a myriad of community partnerships, small learning communities, and a technology initiative. Teachers reeled from the sheer number of changes. Baker Middle School significantly improved its school climate and started to improve classroom instruction. While reform gained a foothold in the school, it was dependent on too few leaders. The school lacked the staff expertise and leadership needed to engage in strong subject area teaching. Mathematics instruction was particularly problematic. As a consequence, there was little gain in achievement.

TEACHERS' CONCERNS SHAPE THEIR RESPONSE TO *CHILDREN ACHIEVING*

Thirty years of research on school change has shown that educational policies and reform initiatives are reinterpreted and reshaped as they encounter the on-the-ground realities of schools. Principals and teachers view new reforms through their beliefs about their students and their perceptions of what is working and not working in their schools.

If they do not believe in the tenets of the reform and/or do not see them as a good fit with their schools and students, they are less likely to implement it in the way policymakers intended. And so a major task for reform leaders is to secure the buy-in of front-line educators. What were Philadelphia middle school teachers' perceptions of the *Children Achieving* reforms? How did they assess the reforms' fit with the needs of their students and schools?

A survey of Philadelphia teachers administered in 1997 and again in 1999 showed that:

- Middle school teachers were very concerned about student discipline and student motivation.
- Many believed that their students had the potential to reach high standards, but that there were significant obstacles to improved learning.
- Overall, slightly more middle school teachers viewed the reforms favorably than elementary teachers and markedly more middle school teachers viewed the reforms favorably than high school teachers.
- Middle school teachers expressed the most support for standards and small learning communities as potentially beneficial to their students, but in practice these reforms did not always meet teachers' expectations.

STUDENT DISCIPLINE

We all think that discipline is the main problem in the school. This is all we talk about at lunch.[14]

This quote illustrates the extent to which student discipline was on the minds of middle school teachers and principals throughout the *Children Achieving* reform. In 1999, more than half (56.7 percent) of the middle school teachers responding to the survey reported that student behavior had worsened in the previous two years. Middle school teachers were more likely to report that student misbehavior interfered with their teaching than their elementary and high school colleagues. (See Table 4.)

[14] Middle school teacher, 1999.

TABLE 4. STUDENT DISCIPLINE AND SCHOOL CLIMATE, 1999 TEACHER SURVEY

	Percentage of Teachers Agreeing with Statement			
Statement	Elementary Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools	Total Percentage
Level of student misbehavior in this school interferes with my teaching	63.8	77.0	70.9	67.6
Students are generally well behaved in the classroom	60.8	49.5	63.0	59.5

TABLE 5. OBSTACLES TO LEARNING IDENTIFIED BY MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS, 1999 TEACHER SURVEY

There are many factors that might hinder or prevent students from learning. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree that the following items hinder or prevent the students you teach from learning.

Statement	Percent in Agreement
Lack of basic skills of students	94.7
Lack of motivation among students	94.2
Students' lack of appropriate study and work habits	93.9
Lack of involvement of students' parents/guardians	88.2
Poor student attendance	73.4
High student mobility in and out of the school	70.3

In a parallel study, Corbett and Wilson[15] found that middle school students were highly critical of their peers' behavior and their classroom learning environments. In five of their six middle school research sites, Corbett and Wilson said there were "...disruptive students who forced teachers to deal with behavior at the expense of instruction. According to students, teachers varied tremendously on how well they were able to manage the ebb and flow of the tide of disruption. Some teachers seemed to spend all of their time trying to 'control' students...The consequence, according to students, was a lack of learning in that subject..."

[15] H.D. Corbett and B.L. Wilson, *"No excuses." The eighth grade year in six Philadelphia middle schools.* Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund, 1999.

STUDENT PREPARATION AND MOTIVATION

Many middle school teachers believed, nevertheless, that better student achievement results were attainable. Seventy percent of middle school teachers believed that their students had the potential to meet the Philadelphia content standards, but they identified serious obstacles to learning. Teachers believed that their students were ill-prepared and lacked basic skills, that students did not feel connected to school or to learning, that students' home environments lacked the resources and structure necessary to support academic learning, and that students often lacked positive role models in their communities. (See Table 5.)

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING REFORMS

Reform leaders mandated that all schools be divided into small learning communities by fall 1998. Small learning communities were multi-age, heterogeneous groupings of fewer than 400 students who shared a common set of teachers over several years. They were intended to improve the conditions of teaching and learning by strengthening relationships between and among teachers and students and by giving the teachers in each small learning community more authority and responsibility for deciding how to shape a challenging academic program for their students.

In 1997, nearly 85 percent of middle school teachers had high hopes for small learning communities. Eighty-three percent believed that content standards would have a positive impact. These numbers indicate that the vast majority of middle school teachers believed in the potential efficacy of two important components of the reform plan. In 1997, more than half were already reporting that content standards (57.6 percent) and small learning communities (60.6 percent) were benefiting their schools. But by 1999, the percentage of teachers reporting a positive impact of content standards (65.7) and small learning communities (66.9) had increased only modestly. These modest increases corroborate two findings from our qualitative research that will be more fully reported later in the report: (1) reform leaders did not adequately communicate the intentions and complexity of standards and small learning communities and therefore school staff focused on superficial and easy to implement aspects of both reforms, and (2) there were many obstacles to effective implementation of standards and small learning communities.

By 1999, slightly more than half (54.7 percent) of middle school teachers reported that the SAT-9 had had a positive effect on their schools. This was a substantial increase from the 36.3 percent who, in 1997, reported a positive effect. Our qualitative school research sheds light on this increase. The most salient change middle school teachers made in their classroom instruction during *Children Achieving* was greater attention to the test. The survey findings suggest that as teachers made changes in what and how they taught, more teachers came to view these changes in a positive light. They believed that test preparation was the intended instructional change of the reform and that they were complying with the reform plan.

While as many as 69 percent of middle school teachers in 1997 believed that the local school councils had the potential to benefit their schools, by 1999 fewer than half (43 percent) saw local school councils as positively affecting their schools. (See Table 6.)

TABLE 6. PERCEIVED POTENTIAL AND POSITIVE EFFECTS OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING REFORM

Children Achieving Reforms	Percentage of Middle School Teachers		
	1997	1997	1999
	Has the Potential to Have Positive Effect	Already Having a Positive Effect	Had a Positive Effect
Small Learning Communities	84.7	60.6	66.9
Content Standards	83.0	57.6	65.7
Local School Councils	69.0	39.1	43.0
Use of SAT-9	53.6	36.3	54.7
Performance Responsibility Index	46.7	30.6	42.1

TABLE 7. PERCEIVED POSITIVE EFFECTS OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING REFORMS BY SCHOOL LEVEL

Children Achieving Reforms	1999 Teacher Survey Percentage of Teachers Reporting that the Reform has had an Overall Positive Effect			
	Elementary Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools	Total Percentage
Small Learning Communities	61.9	66.9	46.8	59.3
Content Standards	62.3	65.7	39.0	57.5
Use of SAT-9	47.3	54.7	30.2	44.5
Graduation and Promotion Requirements	54.0	52.8	43.7	53.0
Performance Responsibility Index	35.5	42.1	21.9	33.3
Local School Councils	39.5	43.0	27.5	37.3

The 1999 teacher survey showed that more middle school teachers perceived the *Children Achieving* reforms as having positive impacts on their schools than did their elementary and secondary colleagues. This was true of all the major components of the reform except the graduation and promotion requirements where a slightly higher percentage of elementary teachers reported positive impacts from the new requirements than did middle school teachers. On the whole, middle school teachers' perceptions of the reforms were similar to those of elementary teachers, and were markedly different than those of high school teachers. (See Table 7.)

Not only did middle school teachers view the major reform components of *Children Achieving* more favorably than did their elementary and secondary colleagues, but they also viewed the

TABLE 8. PERCEIVED POSITIVE EFFECTS OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING SUPPORT SYSTEM BY SCHOOL LEVEL

	Percentage of Teachers Reporting that the Support System has had an Overall Positive Effect			
Children Achieving Support System	Elementary Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools	Total Percentage
Curriculum Frameworks	62.8	66.6	41.4	58.4
Teaching and Learning Network	53.1	66.3	31.7	48.7
Clusters	39.2	44.6	24.3	36.7
Family Resource Network	46.7	40.7	30.5	43.7

TABLE 9. PERCEIVED POSITIVE EFFECTS OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING SUPPORT SYSTEMS

	Percentage of Middle School Teachers		
Children Achieving Support System	1997 Has the Potential to Have Positive Effect	1997 Already Having a Positive Effect	1999 Had a Positive Effect
Family Resource Network	66.9	36.1	40.7
Teaching and Learning Network	63.2	40.0	66.3
Clusters	56.7	33.3	44.6
Curriculum Frameworks	NA	NA	66.6

support systems provided by *Children Achieving* more positively. The only exception was their view of the Family Resource Network (FRN). (See Table 8.)

Among the support systems provided by *Children Achieving*, the Teaching and Learning Network and the Curriculum Frameworks received the highest ranking from middle school teachers. Two-thirds reported that the Teaching and Learning Network (66.3 percent) and the Curriculum Frameworks (66.6 percent) had had a positive effect. In contrast, Table 9 shows that, in 1997, most middle school teachers held the highest hopes for the Family Resource Network as a positive influence, but by 1999, only 40.7 percent of teachers reported that the Family Resource Network had benefited their schools. (The Family Resource Network provides non-instructional services and supports to children and families across the city and serves as a liaison between schools and community health and social service agencies.) Teachers' beliefs about their students and their families may explain why they initially believed in the potential of the Family Resource Network to positively impact their schools and their students' achievement. It is likely that they looked to the FRN to help them deal with disruptive, difficult students and to intervene with families in need of help. They did not understand that the FRN's

purpose was to coordinate support services — not provide them — and were disappointed when FRN staff did not provide direct services to students whom they felt needed immediate assistance.

In summary, Philadelphia middle school teachers and principals were very concerned about student discipline and student attitudes. They wanted their schools to be safe and orderly. They wanted their students to recognize the benefits of education and to invest in their schools. They believed that small learning communities were a good match for what ailed their schools and their students.

TEACHERS' RESPONSE TO THE REFORM

INCENTIVES FOR STUDENTS

Our interviews with teachers and principals during the second year of *Children Achieving* showed that they quickly learned about the intricacies of the District's new accountability system, especially how the Performance Index was calculated. In response to the accountability system, Philadelphia middle school educators took steps to create school cultures that recognized and rewarded student achievement and motivated students to do their best. Just as the District provided tangible rewards and sanctions to schools based on their students' performance, middle school staff offered tangible incentives — prizes, pizza parties, certificates of distinction — for good attendance at the SAT-9 test, for completing it, and for participating in test preparation activities. For example, one school held a series of raffles in which students could win prizes ranging from gift certificates to computers; another held eighth grade classes at a nearby college campus for a week. There students received coaching in test-taking skills and listened to motivational talks on what it takes to get into college and why good performance on the test was important to their future.

In a case study of Cooper Middle School's improvement efforts, a researcher described what the faculty did to change how students viewed school success.

Four years ago Cooper Middle School held an impressive ceremony for its student athletes. There was no such recognition for academic achievement: there was no honor roll, no assembly honoring either effort or performance.

That has changed. Today honor roll students' names appear prominently in newsletters to parents and in the school entranceway. Honor roll students pay half-price to attend school dances. And the honor roll has been expanded to recognize the C student, because in the words of the vice principal, 'We want the average kid to see themselves as a student, someone who learns and is experiencing school success.'

There are also awards for students who attend school regularly and who get to school and their classes on time. Every morning, over the public address system, the vice principal reads the percentage of students in school for the day. Teachers are similarly recognized

and data for teacher attendance is distributed weekly in a flyer.[16]

The vice principal tracked all students' progress on tests and their report cards; he knew every child at risk of failing and talked to teachers about what could be done to help. Likewise, students at Cooper became more aware of their progress and knew that their achievement was important to staff. This emphasis on outcomes and close attention to data paid off in Cooper's progress on the PRI.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR BETTER STUDENT DISCIPLINE

The creation of small learning communities (SLCs) was a major strategy for improving middle schools. Small learning communities seemed a good idea to middle school teachers and principals who viewed them as an intervention directly aimed at improving student discipline and motivation. SLCs were defined as multi-age, heterogeneous groupings of fewer than 400 students who shared a set of common teachers over several years. They were intended by reform leaders to improve the conditions of teaching and learning by strengthening relationships between and among teachers and students and by giving the teachers in each small learning community the authority and responsibility to decide how best to shape a challenging academic program. But, as implemented in the middle schools, small learning communities proved to be strong mechanisms for improving school climate, but not curriculum and instruction.

Many middle school teachers had internalized the messages of the middle school movement of the early 1990s — that schools should attend to the developmental needs of youngsters and that more intimate environments were developmentally appropriate for active, early adolescents struggling to understand their role in relationship to their peers, families, and communities. Seventy-five percent of middle school teachers said that creating small learning communities was important to improving school safety, as compared with 66 percent of elementary school teachers and 55 percent of high school teachers. One small learning community coordinator explained:

Kids and teachers want to be loyal to our SLC [small learning community] ...This means that the kids want to behave and the teachers don't want to jump to punishment without some steps.[17]

Middle school teachers and principals emphasized their belief that the "family atmosphere" of small learning communities nurtured their students who often lived in harsh circumstances. Teachers often described their SLC as a "family." One teacher commented:

This SLC is like a family. These are my children away from home. Students feel secure; they know who their teachers will be from one year to the next...These are kids; they act out.

[16] Excerpted from a school case study, 2000.

[17] SLC coordinator interview, 1999.

They need us to be sympathetic and firm.[18]

As mentioned earlier, many teachers saw their students' families as "lacking structure" and their communities as "impoverished" and "isolated." Given this deficit perspective of students, their families, and communities, many teachers embraced small learning communities for the same reasons they had believed in middle school houses; they saw their potential for providing students with consistent messages about appropriate behavior and promoting close relationships with caring adults who could mentor students and encourage them to work hard.

Teachers' concerns about student discipline, motivation, and preparation influenced how they interacted with their small learning community colleagues. Middle school teachers were highly appreciative of the opportunities for collegial collaboration that small learning communities offered. But survey data showed that curriculum and instruction were the focus of their collaboration infrequently. In interviews, teachers explained that collaboration in their SLCs focused on student discipline. They also frequently mentioned sending students with whom they were having difficulty for a "time-out" in another teacher's classroom. Teachers were highly appreciative of this kind of cooperation and many saw it as the hallmark of a well-functioning small learning community.

[18] Middle school teacher interview, 1999.

COOPER MIDDLE SCHOOL VIGNETTE: A CONSISTENT FOCUS YIELDS TEST SCORE GAINS

Student Attendance: Percent of students attending 90 percent of days or more in 1996 and 85 percent of days or more in 2000

	1996	2000
Cooper Middle School	57.7	59.2
Middle School Average	69.2	72.0

Staff Attendance: Percent of staff attending 95 percent of days or more

	1996	2000
Cooper Middle School	73.8	54.4
Middle School Average	52.1	58.4

Promotion Rate: (in percents)

	1996	2000
Cooper Middle School	49.1	88.2
Middle School Average	81.5	94.9

Students' SAT-9 scores at or above basic	1996	2000
Reading	39.9	49.9
Math	18.0	26.8
Science	17.3	27.9

Cooper Middle School enrolled 1,200 students with 92 percent from low-income backgrounds. Enrollment was 45 percent White, 32 percent Latino, and 18 percent African American. Unlike other middle schools, whose leaders sought strong outside partners in reform, Cooper's leaders looked within to identify strategies and resources to improve student achievement. Cooper's vice principal collected and thoroughly analyzed data related to the Performance Responsibility Index and the school crafted its educational program to yield improvements on those indicators. Cooper instituted a weekly Skill Day during which teachers in subject areas tested on the SAT-9 focused instruction on preparing students for the test. Each small learning community developed at least one unit of study related to its thematic focus. The school also established an awards program that recognized student achievement. These changes led to significant student achievement gains, but the quality of instruction remained inconsistent across the school.

CHANGES IN CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Children Achieving, like other standards-based reform plans, aimed to improve the core of education — teaching and learning — by defining what would count as evidence of learning. Reform leaders believed that adopting tougher accountability measures for schools and stiffer promotion and graduation requirements for students would raise performance. In congruence with their belief that those closest to the classroom should be in charge of decisions about teaching, District leaders initially did not specify a curriculum or an instructional approach for Philadelphia schools.

This changed in 1998 when the District issued the Curriculum Frameworks which offered "the central tenets of constructivism as a framework for organizing standards-driven curriculum and instruction in classrooms."[19] Advocates within the District pushed an instructional reform agenda — constructivism — because they believed its emphasis on conceptual understanding was congruent with the District's standards and that it would counter what they perceived as an undesirable consequence of the accountability system — teachers' narrow use of test preparation materials and activities.

Constructivism is based on the learning theory that students construct their own knowledge as they make sense of the world around them. Constructivist teaching and learning emphasizes the student's role in shaping the questions to be addressed in the classroom curriculum. Its advocates seek to engage students in hands-on instructional activities and to encourage students to think critically about what they are learning and how they are learning. Constructivism requires teachers to be sensitive to how students are building conceptual understanding. The rise of constructivism as part of the reform plan was also reflected in the District's new promotion policy which required eighth graders to complete a service learning project and a multidisciplinary project in order to graduate.

The instructional changes most frequently reported by teachers in interviews and observed by our researchers were increased preparation of students for standardized tests and development and implementation of thematic curriculum which was often related to small learning communities' thematic focus. We rarely observed classroom lessons that incorporated a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. And although seemingly well-aligned with the tenets of constructivism, service learning projects, multidisciplinary projects, and SLC thematic curricula frequently fell short of the kind of rigorous learning experiences intended by reform leaders.

[19] School District of Philadelphia, *Curriculum frameworks*. Philadelphia: Author, 1998.

SIDEBAR 3. CHILDREN ACHIEVING'S MAJOR INSTRUCTIONAL INITIATIVES

Over the course of the *Children Achieving* reform initiative, Philadelphia policymakers generated a host of challenging reform initiatives related to setting high standards for student learning, establishing an accountability system to measure progress toward meeting those standards, and transforming classroom instruction from a teacher-centered, transmission model to a student-centered constructivist model. These reforms included:

1996 The District institutes a new standardized test, the SAT-9, which includes more open-ended writing tasks and problem-solving based questions.

1997 The District issues academic content standards in seven subject areas that outline the knowledge and skills Philadelphia students should acquire, with defined benchmarks at the fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades.

1998 The District provides Curriculum Frameworks to guide teachers in their development and selection of curriculum materials.

1998 The first two-year accountability cycle is completed. The District rewards or sanctions schools depending on their performance on the Performance Responsibility Index.

1998 The District develops and implements the Comprehensive Support Process, designed to ensure that students who are not having academic success are identified and that adjustments are made to their instructional program.

1999 The District phases in more rigorous promotion requirements. Eighth grade students are required to pass all major subjects (reading/English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies), to complete a service learning and a multidisciplinary project, and to obtain a minimum score of Below Basic III on the SAT-9 in reading and math to be promoted to high school. (Because of the lack of funding for summer school and other support services, however, students who failed to meet the new requirements are not retained in eighth grade in 2000-2001. This decision is not announced until after the school year has ended.)

TEST PREPARATION

The most frequently implemented strategies for improving student performance on the test were the reorganization of staffing and schedules, the purchase of new test preparation materials, and increased instructional time on test-taking skills.

REORGANIZING STAFFING AND SCHEDULES AND PURCHASING NEW MATERIALS

The results of the 1999 teacher survey confirmed our qualitative research in schools and showed that the accountability system became an increasingly prominent feature of the school environment between 1997 and 1999. There were increases in the

TABLE 10. MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE CHILDREN ACHIEVING ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Statement	1997	1999
I feel pressured to improve student test scores.	NA	80.6
I have the materials I need to enable my students to do well on the SAT-9.	31.2	48.1
The SAT-9 is well aligned with the subject matter I teach in my class.	30.3	48.0
I am concerned that many teachers in my school are spending too much time on test-taking skills.	33.4	43.5

percentages of middle school teachers who reported that they had the materials they needed to help students do well on the SAT-9 and that the test was well aligned with the curriculum they taught. However, many expressed concern that too many teachers were devoting too much time on test-taking skills. (See Table 10.)

CHANGES IN CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Researchers observed three primary approaches to preparation for the SAT-9 and the Pennsylvania State Standard Assessment (PSSA).

In the first approach, middle school teachers used test preparation workbooks purchased by their schools and clusters to prepare students. Use of these workbooks occurred in test preparation classes that students took in addition to their regular courses, or in after-school tutoring programs for students who were at risk of scoring below Basic. The following description of a test preparation class from a researcher's field notes illustrates this approach.

This is a seventh grade class that is specifically aimed at preparation for the SAT-9. All the students in the small learning community take this class for one half of the year. The teacher tells the group, 'In preparation for the SAT-9, you need to know things, like reading and writing, and you'll need to give detailed answers. What does that mean, detailed answers?' Students respond: 'Describe it.' 'Working around an idea.' 'A lot of information.' 'Specifics.'

The teacher asks students to explain how two sentences are different: 'She wore a dress and earrings,' and 'She wore a red dress and sparkling, diamond earrings.' After a brief discussion of the sentences, the teacher hands out a worksheet produced by a test publisher, entitled 'Putting Ideas to Work.' It consists of 10 short sentences which the students are to elaborate by adding 'descriptive words.' The students complete the worksheet.[20]

This kind of test preparation was the most frequently observed by researchers. It represented the worst kind of instruction in its narrowly focused attention to skills that were

[20] Researcher's field notes, 1998.

taught in isolation from curriculum topics and from meaningful writing assignments.

A second approach to preparing students for the SAT-9 was the use of open-ended writing tasks and problem-solving activities. An analysis of classroom observations showed that between 1996 and 1999, middle school teachers increased their use of both of these instructional strategies. In follow-up interviews, teachers explained that these activities would prepare students for the test and frequently mentioned that they had received training in their use by Teaching and Learning Network staff. Further analysis of the observation data showed that writing and problem-solving activities often appeared as isolated events, unrelated to curriculum units. This disconnection diluted the educational benefit of such activities, because students were not flexing their intellectual muscles in pursuit of deeper conceptual understanding in science, mathematics, or the social sciences.

In a third approach to test preparation, teachers incorporated questions, problems, and assignments similar to those on the test into their classroom curriculum units and daily lesson plans. The vignette below from a sixth grade classroom illustrates this approach.

This sixth grade classroom at Baker School is jam-packed with science stuff. The teacher frames the lesson. 'We're going to do a graphing exercise, and then I'll give you time to work in your groups on your planet projects, because it's almost time for them to be due.'

She hands out graphing paper and a worksheet that is part of the AIMS science curriculum. (This curriculum is on the National Science Foundation's list of approved programs. Philadelphia's Urban Systemic Initiative has provided training for teacher leaders throughout the District on AIMS and other NSF-approved programs. Baker's work with Talent Development, a whole-school reform model, has reinforced the use of the AIMS materials. Talent Development staff have mapped a curriculum sequence with Baker teachers and provided in-classroom coaching in the use of the materials.)

The worksheet has a chart with information about each planet's diameter, rotation, moons, and rings. She explains, 'You'll be taking the SAT-9 soon and you'll have some charts and graphs on the test. Probably a lot like what we're going to do today.' She then proceeds to ask a series of questions that require students to read the information on the chart. She then moves the class to the graphing assignment. 'We're going to draw a graph that shows the number of moons for each planet.' The class then walks through the steps needed to create the graph. 'What do we need to do first?' A student comes to the board and draws the X and Y axis and so forth, until the graph is complete. Before moving to group work, the teacher explains again, 'When you take the SAT-9, they may give you a table similar to the one we were looking at and ask you to convert it into a graph. Or they may give you a graph and ask you to convert it to a table.'[21]

[21] Researcher's field notes, 1999.

This approach was rarer than the use of test preparation workbooks or isolated open-ended writing assignments and problem-solving activities. One principal explained that it required a skilled and sophisticated teacher to incorporate this kind of skill-building activity into the curriculum. "Teachers need much more support in integrating these test preparation activities into their regular classroom practice and curriculum and in helping students to understand how what they are doing in class carries over to the testing situation."[22]

THEMATIC CURRICULA

Children Achieving's leaders intended for SLCs to offer students coherent and personalized educational programs. All small learning communities were to be "built around a unifying theme"[23] that would help students make connections across subject areas and between school and the "real world." Our research indicated that the development of thematic curricula was a major focus in Philadelphia's middle schools during *Children Achieving*. Themes distinguished small learning communities from houses and signified to many middle school teachers that reform was really under way at their schools. They also had a ring of familiarity to middle school educators. Proponents of middle schools had long advocated multidisciplinary teaching and learning as a way to tap into young adolescents' personal concerns and their concerns about the larger world.[24] This fit between a District mandate (theme-based small learning communities) and the inclinations of many middle school teachers may explain why, even at an early stage of implementation, 57.6 percent of middle school teachers judged that their small learning community themes were strong.[25] Two years later this number had only increased to 58.2 percent.[26] As we will show below, these teachers may have been overly generous in their assessments of the contributions of thematic curriculum.

Although teachers reported that their small learning communities were attempting to develop and implement thematic curricula, the majority of middle school teachers we interviewed also said that this was a challenging undertaking. One teacher summed up the most significant obstacle: "It's difficult to convince people that they can do thematic." She went on to explain that some teachers couldn't find connections between their subjects and the theme, while others didn't want to take time away from curriculum topics that they considered more significant. As one math teacher explained, "I'm trying to get my

[22] Principal interview, 1999.

[23] School District of Philadelphia, *Essential characteristics of small learning communities*. Philadelphia, Author, 1996.

[24] Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *Turning points: Preparing youth for the 21st century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1989. J. Beane, *A middle school curriculum: From rhetoric to reality*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association, 1990.

[25] 1997 teacher survey.

[26] 1999 teacher survey.

SIDEBAR 4. SKILL DAY AT COOPER MIDDLE SCHOOL

Of the five schools in which we conducted intensive qualitative research over several years, Cooper Middle School showed the most dramatic improvement in test scores. Its strategy was to move Basic III students to Basic or above, and to maintain or increase the level of students at Basic to a level of Proficient or above. To implement this strategy, the school instituted Skill Day. The vice principal explained the basic premise of Skill Day as "Making kids understand the format of the [SAT-9] test, not the test itself...Give kids practice on the test. How do you attack those kinds of questions?" A rationale and definition of Skill Day was provided in Cooper's 1998-1999 School Improvement Plan:

Our goal is for improvement in general with a keen focus on increasing our SAT-9 test scores. Subsequently, we have implemented a "Skill Day" once a week. On that day all of our academic classes are required to focus on either open-ended or enhanced multiple-choice experiences for our seventh and eighth grade students.

Before initiating Skill Day, Cooper's teachers received professional development around open-ended and enhanced multiple-choice formats. At curricular meetings, teachers discussed the new approach and also consulted with other schools in the District that had enacted similar programs.

To better understand what happens during a Skill Day lesson, consider the following assignment from an English/language arts teacher at Cooper. The teacher said one purpose of the lesson was to provide students with "...open-ended practice using the SAT-9 format." Students, having read the children's fairy tale, *Cinderella*, were asked to consider the familiar story anew.

CHARACTER

Get the Big Picture

- What was the relationship between Cinderella, her stepmother, and her stepsisters?
- Why did each of the above characters react differently in similar situations?
- Why, do you think, each of the characters — Cinderella, the stepmother, and the stepsisters — acted the way they did?

Take a Closer Look

- How might the story have changed if the stepmother and stepsisters had been kinder to Cinderella?

Be a Critic

- When this story was written, what age group do you think he or she was writing for? Why do you think that?

Importantly, there was a faculty-wide commitment to Skill Day. The wide support teachers gave to Skill Day demonstrated a united and consistent instructional front. Indeed, the only criticism heard regarding Skill Day was that it did not go far enough. An assistant SLC coordinator enthusiastically supported Skill Day but contended:

My argument [is] every day should be skill day. When it comes to writing, we need to teach kids the language of the test. Kids need to know what is being asked. You don't prepare for the SAT-9 in one day; it's a constructivist orientation all the time. Some drill and kill, I admit. You go over things in a variety of ways.

students through a pre-Algebra curriculum. They're having enough difficulty with that. I can't afford to spend my time and theirs figuring out how to connect to African American heritage."

Thematic teaching was a murky concept to many. One principal said, "We're trying to figure out what thematic really means." A teacher at the same school reflected on his small learning community's experience:

We're working with [the theme of] water as a resource. But not a whole lot of things are carrying over as a house [small learning community] yet. The seventh and eighth graders went to the aquarium. And kids are getting a lot of information about water. But it's still at the stage of segmented learning. The theme has a lot of potential, but moving to this integrated thematic teaching, with all the other things we're doing, is really hard. We're pulled in a lot of different directions.

THEMATIC CURRICULA AND SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Small learning community events were a common manifestation of thematic curricula in middle schools. For example, one principal pointed with pride to the multicultural small learning community's "Immigration Day" as evidence that "themes are getting to be real here." Each advisory classroom in the multicultural small learning community researched a country. On Immigration Day students became world travelers (with their own passports!) and moved from one classroom to another learning about the various countries. Isolated events such as Immigration Day, assemblies, and field trips exposed students to the small learning community's theme and contributed to the identity formation of the small learning community, but they did not offer students opportunities to explore topics in depth.

THEMATIC CURRICULA AND CONTENT STANDARDS

We encountered many examples of thematic curricula that were not connected to major disciplinary concepts or to the District's content standards. For example, Ms. T., a teacher in the health small learning community planned a project that related to the small learning community's theme of social, emotional, and physical wellness. Her students watched the film "The Burning Bed," the story of a woman who murdered her husband after years of physical abuse. The class discussed the movie and read some booklets about domestic abuse and then students made posters. The topic was socially relevant and potentially of interest to young adolescents. The film served as the stimulus for group activity. However, as implemented, the project was not intellectually challenging. There was little or no independent research by students and opportunities for students to develop reading and writing skills were limited. The resulting posters showed little creativity and appeared hastily constructed.

THEMATIC CURRICULA AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Ms. G. worked with the Philadelphia Museum of Art to develop an Asian Arts project, "Inner Visions." Over the course of the school year, students did several paper- and book-making projects and studied how these crafts developed in Asia. The students' efforts decorated the room, transforming it from a drab and deteriorating space to one that was lively and inviting. The project offered students an entry into a rich cultural resource, the Philadelphia Art Museum. It tied literacy, history, and the arts together into a unit of study that was enriching and fun. But in 1999-2000, Ms. G. explained why she did not repeat the paper- and book-making project, "There were so many other new things going on in the school and I just didn't have the energy." But she also said that the unit had been a highlight of the previous year and that she was currently planning a new unit, "Cultural Relations in the Neighborhood," for the next year.

THEMATIC CURRICULA AND TEACHER COLLABORATION

In some small learning communities, teachers developed curriculum units centered around the small learning community's theme. Often this curriculum work occurred during the summer, but in numerous instances, teachers reported that they were not able to carry out these curriculum units as planned, if at all, due to staff and schedule changes during the school year.

The communication small learning community at Cooper Middle School developed several units of study related to the theme. The coordinator explained why she and her colleagues had chosen communication as a focus, "In today's time, spoken and written communication are important, especially in high school. Nobody sees you [when you apply for a job]. It's how you communicate, first on paper, then in person." During the 1998-1999 school year, the broad topic "communication" was divided into four thematic units: (1) getting to know you, (2) multicultural celebrations, (3) biographies — "now and then," and (4) survival. (Teachers were unable to implement the final unit because the testing schedule in the spring months cut into instructional time.)

There was an overall emphasis on reading, writing, and oral skills. Students kept journals and logbooks and participated in demonstrations in front of their peers. For example, a field trip to a local park required students to (1) determine cost per student of food and equipment needed for the trip (math), and (2) look for particular objects in the park that were collected for classifications and discussion (science). An English-language arts lesson had students making collages using photographs, magazine clippings, and written statements. For a social studies segment, each grade took a decade in history and researched famous people, trends in dance, music, clothes, literature, etc. Students performed and dressed appropriately for their decade and each classroom displayed their decade for a final project. Final displays were taped for a

video presentation. These varied activities underscored communication while also integrating disciplines and topics.

The communication theme was accessible and pragmatic to students and teachers and lent itself well to a variety of disciplines. As one teacher noted, the theme was not "limiting" in scope and definition "like a theme of 'Rain Forest' is." But getting students to produce high-quality work was challenging.

In summary, our researchers judged most of the thematic curricular work in the middle school small learning communities to be in an early stage of development characterized by:

- Themes that did not lend themselves to rich intellectual investigation or potentially rich themes that were developed only superficially;
- An emphasis on isolated events such as assemblies and field trips that exposed students to the theme and built the identity of the small learning community, but did not offer students opportunities to explore a topic in depth; and
- Little attention to how different disciplinary perspectives illuminate a theme or topic.

The immaturity of thematic curricula is not surprising in light of the serious obstacles that middle school staff faced in planning and implementing new curriculum. Planning thematic curricula proved to be very time-consuming. In the best possible situations, such as the communication small learning community described above, teachers met for several days over the summer to develop the curriculum for the following year. But these plans were fragile and often unraveled in the face of unavailable materials, changes in rosters, or other problems. In addition, the principals assigned the new teachers who flooded middle schools each September as needed. This meant that many small learning communities began the school year with only half of their teachers having any knowledge of the theme or history in planning how to integrate the theme into their classrooms.

WHAT'S MISSING: A VISION FOR STUDENTS' INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Philadelphia middle school teachers wanted school to provide students with more consistent messages about appropriate behavior; they wanted their students to see beyond their present circumstances, to be exposed to people, places, and experiences outside their neighborhoods, to see value in education, and to try hard to succeed. Teachers and principals did not want their schools to be judged "low-performing" under the District's new accountability system. These concerns led teachers and principals to:

- Develop incentives that would motivate students to attend school, earn good grades, and do well on the SAT-9;

- Embrace small learning communities as a strategy for improving school climate;
- Provide many more opportunities for students to practice the kinds of skills required on the SAT-9; and
- Develop and implement thematic curriculum.

Children Achieving's accountability system focused middle school staff on results, at least those measured by the SAT-9. The reform did not, however, make students' intellectual development the guiding force for middle school instructional improvement efforts. Lipman[27] argues that teachers' beliefs about why many of their African American students perform poorly influence what educational reforms teachers are willing to embrace. She found that teachers offered four "non-mutually exclusive" explanations:

1. A deficit theory that attributed school failure to deficiencies in students' social and economic condition, their families, and their culture;
2. A social relations theory that assumed that students did not do well because of an absence of support from school adults and because of a lack of a sense of school membership;
3. A theory of racism that emphasized the role of racial inequality, racism, and marginalization and powerlessness in the low achievement and alienation of African American students; and
4. An educational theory that emphasized the role of irrelevant curriculum and unengaging instruction in creating resistant and alienated students.

We heard all four analyses in our conversations with teachers and principals. But, by far, the deficit and social relations models dominated the discourse in Philadelphia middle schools. School faculties implemented the components of the reform that matched their beliefs about their students and that they believed would meet the demands of the accountability system. Students did not have the skills necessary to perform well on the test, so the result was often a lot of test preparation of the drill-and-kill variety. Small learning communities, for the most part, remained an intervention aimed at addressing the social needs of students (and, as we shall see in the next section, their teachers, as well), but not their academic ones. Likewise, thematic curricula frequently were designed to address perceived deficits (e.g., get the students out of their poor neighborhoods) and help students to feel part of the small learning community, rather than to engage them in an interdisciplinary exploration of an issue or question.

In summary, teachers' attention to test preparation and their attempts to develop and implement thematic curricula did not result in classroom instruction that pressed students to tackle more difficult material. Teachers

[27] P. Lipman, *Race, class, and power in school restructuring*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998.

did not see how the instructional activities and units described in the District's Curriculum Frameworks would produce better student performance on the SAT-9. After five years of systemic reform, most middle school teachers did not yet know how to use the District's content standards and Curriculum Frameworks to develop curricula, instructional activities, and assessments that helped students reach deeper levels of understanding of subject matter. Without this knowledge, their beliefs about students continued to dominate their instructional decisions.

A BAKER CLASSROOM EXAMPLE

We also saw some instances in which all four theories were present in instruction. Such was the case with Ms. Wald, an eighth grade teacher at Baker Middle School. Ms. Wald's classroom curriculum was almost entirely project-based. Students were simultaneously producing the art and text for an "Alphabet Book" as part of their study of the Harlem Renaissance and conducting an inventory of neighborhood buildings. In the former project, each student was responsible for one letter of the alphabet. The production of this drawing actually involved several steps. Students imitated the style of several Harlem Renaissance artists and then chose a style for drawing their letter. Then, students chose a word that began with the letter they were responsible for and which was related to the civil rights movement (e.g., B is for "Bus Boycott"). They used that word in the illustration of their letter. When all the illustrations were complete, they were bound and published in a book.

An urban landscape architect and a school district employee whose job it was to promote community involvement in schools collaborated on a second project in Ms. Wald's class. Students toured the neighborhood around the school, noting which buildings were residences, businesses, or abandoned. They entered data from this neighborhood inventory in a spreadsheet and mapped them. They analyzed the data and prepared PowerPoint presentations for the mayor and other community leaders on their findings. The students felt empowered by learning experiences that offered them a chance to have their voices heard in the community. One student told us:

I learned that mostly it's the people that are in charge that have more say in the government, because they're the ones that step out and do something about how they feel. And sometimes when somebody doesn't agree with their opinion, well instead of just, you know, just talking, they should at least do something to change, to change the other person's opinion [thumping the desk for emphasis], so that they can make an opinion too.

Another said:

And if we, if we do show up at meetings and things, and tell them and tell the mayor what we need to do in our communities, we can get it fixed. It's not going to be done in a month or the same day that you say it's going to be done, but it will be done.

Ms. Wald was able to provide the support necessary for students to take on and complete challenging, thematic projects. In part, her success stemmed from her emphasis on continuous revision. As Shakira, a student, explained:

[The teacher] will not let you go away if the paper is not perfect. She gave me an A on my paper, but she said she wanted me to write more, make it better. I was like I got an A already. Ain't nothing past an A.

Later, when she was asked whether the continual revisions required by her teacher helped her learn about writing, Shakira responded:

I learned about it, and I'm learning. Well, it's a gift...Sometimes I think of it as a gift, sometimes because we learned the stuff that in our other classes [we didn't].

Ms. Wald successfully set high expectations for her students and involved the community by adding the support of an architect and other school personnel. She engaged students by having them study about African American cultural and political issues and empowered her students by having them present their findings to the community — allowing their voices to be heard. This is an example of a skilled teacher who developed student academic skills based on real content, not just project work. As mentioned earlier, part of her success relates to her 'taskmaster' technique which forced students to reach for higher standards. This example also illustrates the ambivalence that students felt as they questioned the need to refine their work when they had already achieved an A. This is a response typical of many urban middle school students and illustrative of what teachers face on a daily basis. Teachers need patience, skill, and tenacity to encourage students to work to higher levels of achievement.

DUTTON MIDDLE SCHOOL VIGNETTE: FALSE STARTS AT IMPROVEMENT, COMPROMISED PERFORMANCE GAINS

Student Attendance: Percent of students attending 90 percent of days or more in 1996 and 85 percent of days or more in 2000

	1996	2000
Dutton Middle School	77.9	76.4
Middle School Average	69.2	72.0

Staff Attendance: Percent of staff attending 95 percent of days or more

	1996	2000
Dutton Middle School	78.9	62.2
Middle School Average	52.1	58.4

Promotion Rate: (in percents)

	1996	2000
Dutton Middle School	84.4	97.5
Middle School Average	81.5	94.9

Students' SAT-9 scores at or above basic	1996	2000
Reading	59.9	51.1
Math	23.3	13.3
Science	19.6	24.8

Dutton Middle School served 1,200 students with 80 percent from low-income backgrounds. The student body was 99 percent African American. Before *Children Achieving*, Dutton had revamped its curriculum and experimented with new teaming structures and extended periods for core subjects. At the onset of the new reform, Dutton lost its principal and numerous teacher leaders when they assumed leadership positions in cluster offices and central administration. Its student population also changed significantly when foster homes opened in its neighborhood. The school faltered in its adoption of *Children Achieving* reforms, partly due to a shrinking school budget and partly due to the arrival of a new school principal. The conversion to small learning communities did not go well, teacher morale declined, and teacher turnover increased. All of these factors contributed to declines in reading and math achievement. In 1998, with encouragement from its cluster leader, Dutton Middle School staff adopted the same whole-school reform model that had been implemented at Abbott and Baker Middle Schools. A new principal came to the school in 1999-2000, but it remained uncertain whether school staff could rally enthusiasm for still another leader's improvement plan.

INTERNAL SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Why did middle school teachers make relatively modest changes in their classroom instruction in response to the ambitious and fundamental reforms offered in the *Children Achieving* plan? While there are many reasons outlined in this report, a primary answer is that most Philadelphia middle schools did not become environments where teachers routinely engaged in professional learning with their colleagues. School leaders did not understand the importance of creating a school culture based on continuous professional learning and they did not see the professional development of teachers as their responsibility. Principals did not receive the guidance and support necessary from clusters to re-imagine their roles as leaders of a change process in their schools and to put together the various pieces of the complex reform agenda into holistic change strategies for school improvement. The constant turnover of leadership and teaching staff made school improvement more of a start-stop-start-all-over-with-something-new process than a sustained effort at progress. The two reforms that were aimed at improving school organizations — small learning communities and local school councils — did not have the intended impacts on teaching and school governance.

LINKS AMONG SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY, AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Fullan argues that "There is no substitute for internal school development."[28] Strong school organizations are particularly key in a systemic reform effort because teachers need extensive support and direction as they undertake the challenging alterations in their practice demanded by standards-based reforms. Schools must be about helping teachers to learn more about the content areas that they teach and about instructional approaches that will help their students master more difficult material. Standards-based curriculum and instruction require that teachers themselves experience content in new ways so that they can teach for conceptual understanding.[29] Time and ongoing support are required for teachers to move from concerns about managing new techniques, curricula, and materials to concerns about what their students are actually learning.[30]

The links among professional learning, school leadership, and professional community, and their contributions to

[28] M. Fullan, *Change forces: The sequel.* Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 2000.

[29] D.L. Ball, "Teacher learning and the mathematics reform: What we think we know and what we need to learn." *Phi Delta Kappan* 77 (1996), pp. 500-508.

[30] S. Loucks-Horsley, P.W. Hewson, N. Love, and K.E. Stiles, *The knowledge that supports professional development: Designing professional development for teachers of science and mathematics.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1998

school organization are becoming increasingly clear. Accomplishing standards-based school reform requires a new kind of school leadership.[31] The core work of school leaders is to promote the continuous learning of all staff. School leaders must nurture staff's competence, initiative, and commitment and create a culture of high expectations.

In-classroom support, strong instructional leadership and a professional community that encourages the active analysis of teaching and learning are important elements of a strong school-based professional development system.[32] Sebring and Bryk found that in Chicago schools that were making student achievement gains, principals pushed forward in three areas: (1) strengthening parent community ties to school, (2) developing teachers' knowledge and skills, and (3) promoting professional community.[33]

But it's unrealistic to believe that a few school leaders working in large urban schools can provide sufficient, hands-on guidance for teachers to make the changes necessary in a standards-based reform effort. Spillane's[34] concept of "distributed" leadership offers an alternative to the image of principal as "lone instructional leader." Instead, various people in a school assume leadership roles around such tasks as developing a shared vision, determining clear priorities, promoting continuous professional learning, and strong professional community.[35] Fullan also speaks to the necessity of broad and deep school leadership in his contention that new school cultures must be built — cultures that have collegial relationships characterized by high expectations for learning and performance for everyone, adults and students alike; cultures in which teachers routinely reflect about their classroom practices together, seek out new and promising ideas, and enlist the support of knowledgeable outsiders.[36]

TURBULENT SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Such a transformation is not easy to achieve when the larger District environment — underfunded schools, massive teacher and administrative turnover — is working against rather than for you. Order, routine, good will, adequate materials and resources, and continuity of key staff are basic building blocks of any school's improvement. Unfortunately, these factors were absent in many Philadelphia middle schools and in fact, as seen in findings from teacher surveys, middle school

[31] R.F. Elmore, *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute, 2000.

[32] M. Smylie, E. Allensworth, R.C. Greenberg, R. Harris, and S. Luppescu, *Teacher professional development in Chicago: Supporting effective practice*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2001.

[33] P.B. Sebring and A.S. Bryk, "School leadership and the bottom line in Chicago." *Phi Delta Kappan* 81 (2000), pp. 440-443.

[34] J. Spillane, "State and local government relations in the era of standards-based reform: Standards, state policy instruments, and local instructional policymaking." *Educational Policy* 13 (1999).

[35] M. Neuman and W. Simmons, "Leadership for student learning." *Phi Delta Kappan* 82 (2000), pp. 9-12.

[36] Fullan, *Change forces*.

teachers perceived that school conditions actually worsened between 1997 and 1999.

Middle school teachers and students described their schools' learning environments as turbulent. The constant turnover of middle school teachers and principals was a significant contributing factor to the edginess of middle school environments. Recruiting and retaining teachers at the middle school level — always difficult for the District — reached crisis proportions during *Children Achieving*. Useem[37] outlined the seriousness of the situation:

The proportion of teachers new to the District in the city's 42 middle schools during the 1999-2000 school year averaged 13.5 percent, ranging from a low of zero vacancies in four schools (that were either small or had fewer low-income students) to a high of 40 percent in one school. When the four schools that have some element of student selection are removed from the analysis, the average is 14.4 percent new staff members. In 11 of the 42 schools, more than 20 percent of the teaching staff was new to the District and the school. Philadelphia's middle schools still had 78 teaching vacancies in May of the school year, an understated figure since some principals had given up listing the position. By contrast, high schools across the District had only 18 vacancies at that point.

Overall, teachers in the 38 non-selective neighborhood middle schools in the District averaged 11.7 years of service in their school building, considerably lower than the 17.7 year average of the teachers in the 22 non-selective neighborhood high schools.

Useem's research and ours showed that many new teachers initially lacked classroom management strategies that were a good fit with middle grades students. Furthermore, many middle school teachers lacked adequate preparation in the content areas that they were assigned to teach. There is no middle school certification in Pennsylvania. Elementary-certified teachers can teach any subject in grades K-8; secondary-certified teachers (whose certification is tied to a subject area) can teach in grades 5-12, but only in their certified areas. When Philadelphia junior high schools were converted to middle schools, elementary-certified teachers often replaced secondary-certified teachers. Ruby identified two reasons for this shift: "Philosophically, elementary-certified teachers were considered more in tune with the child centered approach to be used. Practically, elementary certified teachers were easier to roster as they were allowed to teach any subject."[38] At the same time, retirements created more openings in senior high schools and experienced secondary-certified teachers elected to leave middle schools in order to teach more mature students and higher-level

[37] B. Useem, *New teacher staffing and comprehensive middle school reform: Philadelphia's experience*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund, 2001.

[38] A. Ruby, *An implementable curriculum approach to improving science instruction in urban schools*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Education Research Association, Montreal, Canada, 1999.

courses in their subject areas. By 1999, *ninety-three percent of teachers in middle schools were elementary-certified.*"

Principals described the implications of disruptive staffing patterns on their schools' capacity to offer a more rigorous curriculum and provide students with the supports they need to succeed as the bar is raised.

A big problem at the middle school level is holding certified math teachers, because they all want to go to the high school where they can teach higher level math. Our people are not all that qualified in math.[40]

Maybe we need to consider covering two or three areas in math a year, so that a teacher can begin to feel comfortable with what they're doing. Right now we teach all math areas and many teachers don't have a conceptual understanding themselves and then we're asking them to teach it. The teachers look at the math on the SAT-9 and say 'This is too hard for the kids.' What they really mean is 'I don't understand this either.' They want to spend all their time teaching computation because that's what they can do.[41]

With so much teacher turnover, inadequate teacher preparation in content or classroom management, lack of adequate supplies and resources, *poor building conditions, and high student and teacher absenteeism, the normal environment in the middle schools was chaotic — hardly a starting point for undertaking the ambitious reform agenda of Children Achieving.*

In the following pages, we examine how the Children Achieving reforms did and did not help middle school faculties overcome the many significant challenges they encountered on the road to instructional improvement. We focus particularly on leadership, professional learning, and professional community. We found that while many middle schools foundered during Children Achieving, a few were able to embark upon the difficult work of establishing a strong academic program that engaged students and produced positive performance results. Abbott Middle School stands as an example of such a school and we look at its reform efforts in depth.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP — LARGE DEMANDS WITH LITTLE SUPPORT

Children Achieving's leaders were largely silent on the role of school leadership, especially the role of the principals. Certainly, the reform design's emphasis on decentralization implied the need for effective leaders and strong capacity at the school level. The new school structures demanded that principals rethink their roles. The creation of local school councils invited parents and teachers into school governance and small learning communities gave teachers much

[39] B. Useem, R. Barends, and K. Lindermayer. *The preparation of middle grades teachers in an era of high stakes and high standards: Philadelphia's predicament.* Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund, 1999.

[40] Principal interview, 1997.

[41] Principal interview, 1999.

latitude in curriculum and instructional decisions. But our research found that the lack of strong school leaders was a persistent problem in Philadelphia during Children Achieving. Principals were overwhelmed by demands from central administration and cluster offices; they received little professional development about their roles as managers of a complex change process; and they were treated as implementers of centrally mandated reforms rather than leaders of schools. In addition, few principals perceived that it was their responsibility to ensure that their teachers were engaged in ongoing professional learning.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Most principals became skilled at reviewing data over the course of the reform, largely due to the District's accountability system. For example, administrators at Cooper Middle School moved aggressively to develop an elaborate, computerized tracking system that produced spreadsheets for individual small learning communities. This system also allowed staff to target individual students that needed special attention. Principals encouraged teachers to concentrate on areas in which students had performed poorly. As one principal explained:

I have had each of our teams looking at its own data and making decisions based on that data. This year I supported them to collect data so that it's not just about 'the principal's giving us something else to do,' but about how do we use this information to help students. I tell them 'Don't use your emotions, use the information to inform your plans.' Each SLC needs to have its own plan, because in a school this large, a global plan is probably not going to affect the classroom.[42]

While principals examined test data much more carefully, they did not think broadly about the role of program assessment in school improvement. For example, they limited their review of data to indicators that were part of the Performance Responsibility Index. Rarely did we see middle school principals examining student work with their staff. Nor did they engage staff members in systematically assessing how things were going. Of course, there were a few exceptions as in the case of Dr. Bender at Baker Middle School.

Dr. Bender described herself as 'a leader of leaders.' Discussion of journal articles became routine at leadership team meetings, as did assessments of how new initiatives were working. For example, at one meeting the leadership team systematically reviewed the recent implementation of small learning communities. Discussion revolved around the pre-planned questions: 'What are we doing? Why are we doing it? What is, or is not working? Where are we headed? Where do we need to go?'

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Strong, content-based professional development was desperately needed in Philadelphia to help stabilize the middle school situation, especially in light of the high teacher turnover and the high number of teachers new to the

[42] Principal interview, 1998.

profession and new to urban schools. Middle schools were a revolving door for teachers and too often new, inexperienced teachers were assigned to these schools. Middle schools had the highest percentage of first-year teachers with almost one in five new to their schools and middle school teachers were more likely to have emergency certification than their counterparts in elementary and high schools.

Under Children Achieving, the Office of Leadership and Learning (OLL) was charged with developing and implementing an overall plan for professional development for administrators and teachers. It also had responsibility for identifying and disseminating "best practices" — research-based reforms that were aligned with Philadelphia's new content standards. The Teaching and Learning Network (TLN) was part of the OLL and served as the professional development arm of the District. TLN coordinators and facilitators were based in the cluster offices so that they could provide custom-tailored support services to schools and teachers. They offered workshops to help teachers understand and implement the reforms and to provide coaching in the classrooms of new teachers and others who needed or requested assistance. Summer content institutes — week-long professional development workshops in each core discipline linked closely to the District's new content standards — were developed by District professional development leaders and first offered in the summer of 1997. They were well-received by teachers and participation in them increased dramatically over the course of the reform.

The accomplishments and challenges of the District and clusters to provide high-quality professional development are documented in other Children Achieving evaluation reports. But a few findings from those studies are relevant to this discussion. Spiri[41] found that, for the most part, principals did not have a clear conception of their role vis-à-vis their staff's professional learning. They did not believe that they were responsible for the professional development of their teachers and relegated this function to the Teaching and Learning Network.

TLN staff spent substantially more time in elementary schools than they did in middle schools. Unlike in elementary schools, where the work of the TLN staff focused on the District's early literacy initiative, in middle schools there was not the same kind of coherent, instructional strategy for improvement. TLN staff members' work in middle schools often focused on orienting teachers to the SAT-9 and coaching them on the use of test preparation materials and activities, and on supporting the many new and inexperienced teachers in middle schools.

[41] M.H. Spiri, *School leadership and reform: Case studies of Philadelphia principals*. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania, 2001.

TABLE 11. PERCENT OF TEACHERS ACTIVE IN DECISION-MAKING

	Nearly All	Most	About Half	Some	None
1997	4.8	16.1	25.0	52.0	2.0
1999	4.1	13.5	22.0	58.4	1.9

TABLE 12. PERCENT OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS WHO AGREED WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS

	1997	1999
The principal is committed to shared decision-making.	46.1	47.3
Teachers are involved in important decisions.	50.6	48.3
Teachers have informal opportunities to influence what happens here.	50.8	51.8

EXPANDING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Although the architects of *Children Achieving* intended to expand participation in school governance through local school councils, our qualitative and quantitative research showed that school leadership did not extend beyond a very few people at four of the five middle schools we studied.

Teachers consistently reported that "the same people come forward." As one teacher said:

I talk to my friends at other middle schools and I know that we're doing much better than most. We have a strong principal. But I worry about when she leaves. It could all fall apart. And there are so few people in the leadership group. It should be spread out more. When it's like this, all the rest of us fall into the role of children.[44]

Findings from the 1999 teacher survey confirm what we heard and observed in our qualitative research and showed that the breadth of participation in middle school leadership changed little during *Children Achieving*.

Parent involvement was never realized either. One reason was that local school councils required that school stakeholders including principals reconsider their roles. There was little or no guidance and support to either parents or principals, to help them understand the expectations of new shared leadership roles. In addition, many principals were threatened by parent involvement and only the most effective leaders understood the

[44] Teacher interview, 2000.

positive potential of real parent involvement. Our research suggests that principals and teachers, and parents were largely unprepared to assume new responsibilities and to redefine their relationships with one another.[45]

INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES

The research literature is clear that maintaining focus over time is essential to substantive school improvement. Principals play a key role in focusing staff on a few robust instructional priorities. Our research found few examples of principals, vice principals, and small learning community coordinators who consistently spent time in classrooms talking to teachers about what they were teaching and how. But when leaders were attentive to classrooms, teachers were clear about instructional priorities. Listen to this teacher at Baker Middle School describe the influence her principal had on her.

She's observed me three times this year and has been clear about what she expects. She wants me to be child-centered, to reflect on the lesson with the children, have objectives on the board [that relate to the District's new content standards], and be sure that kids know what they're doing. And she wants me to use hands-on activities and cooperative learning as much as possible. She has also said she wants us all to do more writing and so now I do a weekly writing process with my students. On Monday we brainstorm, on Tuesday they do a first draft, on Wednesday they edit for a particular focus, and so on. I've also gotten their parents involved by having the kids read their writing to them for homework.

In the first four years of *Children Achieving*, Philadelphia middle school principals consistently identified raising test scores as their number one priority and establishing small learning communities as their primary strategy for improving instruction. We have seen how these priorities yielded superficial changes in curriculum and instruction.

But by year five, when test score gains had flattened and as central office administrators and cluster leaders pressed principals and their faculties to consider research-based improvement strategies, principals more actively sought outside expertise for their schools. In this regard, the accountability measures were effective incentives for leveraging teachers' support for innovations that they might not previously have been willing to try. For example, when Baker Middle School was identified as "low-performing" by central office staff, its principal convinced staff members to adopt the whole-school reform model, Talent Development, as a way to increase test scores and overcome the "shame" of the "low progress" label. Talent Development appealed to staff because of its focus on core curriculum, professional development for teachers, and intensive remedial instruction in mathematics and reading/English/language arts for students who were not succeeding. In another instance, a cluster leader strongly pressed school staff to adopt a reform model after results from tests indicated the low

[45] Spiri, School leadership and reform.

level of student performance. By 1999, four of the five schools in our intensive middle school sample had forged partnerships with whole-school reform models in an attempt to improve instruction and student achievement.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

There were many reasons that principals were not more effective in establishing instructional priorities for their schools. One obstacle included the sheer number of mandates they received from central administration and their cluster offices. A principal quipped:

This reform has been hell on the ground. The tests came before the standards and the Frameworks and professional development. And everything we get is last minute to begin with and then you get another directive that says 'Hey, you better do this instead.'

Principals criticized central office administrators for what appeared to them as, at best, poor timing and at worst, total disregard for how schools operate. For example, they complained that the SAT-9 scores came in too late to influence planning for the next school year. But most of all, principals felt disempowered by the continuous disruptions caused when "central office drops its calendars on ours."

A second obstacle was inadequate professional development for principals. The District never produced a plan for principals' professional growth, and while some cluster leaders did a good job of mentoring and supervising their principals, others did not. In its study of two clusters' reform efforts, the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching noted:

Rarely, however, did these professional development efforts look at the reform efforts, school change, and implications for school leadership holistically, to consider how these should or could work together. Rarely, too, did they address how to operationalize a more facilitating and distributed school leadership and management approach, by developing the leadership capacity in others and a shared accountability. Instead, the leadership development and support was often topical or strategy-focused, leaving it up to the principals to put it all together. [46]

One cluster leader argued that the reform design itself was an obstacle to having principals assume proactive leadership roles in their schools. It minimized the role of building administrators, designating them "implementers" of policy directives from central administration. He declared, "It's turned them into gofers." Certainly, principals felt neglected, alienated, and isolated and many left the District. In our interviews, middle school principals did not mince words:

The District doesn't recognize the importance of the principal. They've turned their back on us. They're putting people in buildings with no support.

[46] M. Orr, *Transforming or running aground: Principals in systemic educational reform* (p. 16). New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2001.

There are all these new principals out there who don't have a leg to stand on. There's been a revolving door in our cluster office, no staff continuity and so their ability to be supportive is limited.

Principals also believed that *Children Achieving*'s accountability system made them singularly vulnerable to the stigma of sanctions for low performance without control over the factors that were central to improving their schools, such as selection and stability of staff, an adequate physical plant, and smaller class size.

SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES — A LOST OPPORTUNITY FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

The *Children Achieving* reform design decentralized decision-making to clusters, schools, and small learning communities. Small learning communities were intended to be an important site for instructional decision-making so that education could be customized for students. They were also intended to foster closer collegial relationships among teachers. By creating a more intimate work environment for teachers who shared a common group of students, reform leaders hoped that small learning communities would encourage greater teacher collaboration and contribute to teachers' professional growth. Our research indicated that although middle school staff members were largely unable to capitalize on the potential of small learning communities to be the catalysts for instructional improvement they were intended to be.

As we have seen, middle school staffs had high hopes for small learning communities. Throughout the five years of our research, middle school principals indicated that the establishment of small learning communities was their primary strategy for improving teaching and raising student achievement. The 1999 CPRE teacher survey indicated that middle school leaders were more successful at putting in place the enabling structures that the District recommended for small learning communities than their elementary and high school colleagues. (See Table 13.)

TABLE 13. PERCENT OF TEACHERS REPORTING THAT SLC ENABLING CONDITIONS WERE IN PLACE

Enabling Condition	Elementary Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools	Total Percentage
Defined location in building	66.5	88.0	70.1	70.9
Common planning time	59.0	79.0	45.9	59.6
Decision-making authority for curriculum and instruction	58.6	67.2	58.3	59.9

But our research showed that middle school staffs focused more easily on the structural components of small learning communities — shared planning time, a designated location in the building, a coordinator — than the educational ones. In large part this was because they did not understand the differences between small learning communities and the old house structure. As one principal explained, "The big problem at [this school] has been that people didn't really understand the concept of a small learning community. Many are still into the house concept." A small learning community coordinator concurred:

A lot of teachers don't understand SLCs. Maybe not enough people visited other schools before we set them up. Plus they weren't really discussed enough by administration. People were given the option to choose the SLC they wanted without enough thinking about the implications. Now we need to think about weak and strong teachers.

The vast majority of middle school teachers focused on only two differences between houses and small learning communities. Small learning communities served students across several grade levels, while middle school houses typically had had a horizontal grade structure. Small learning communities were organized around a thematic curriculum focus, whereas houses had not had a curriculum focus.

Principals continued to see small learning communities as strategy for maintaining the smooth functioning of their schools. This is what they wanted small learning community coordinators to do and what they held them accountable for. Likewise, middle school teachers saw the creation of small learning communities as a way to improve the teaching and learning environment of their schools by improving student behavior and motivation. They urged coordinators to be diligent in handling student discipline problems. Neither teachers nor administrators saw coordinators as instructional leaders who assumed a major role in coordinating the work of teachers and provided support for them as they undertook new instructional methods and curricula.

And so principals sought the same set of skills they had looked for in house directors. They chose coordinators who knew how to mentor and motivate students, who were well-organized administrators, who were efficient at handling the mounds of paperwork required for ordering materials and supplies, who could provide the District with information it requested about students, and who kept teachers informed about school and District policies and events. It's not surprising that many coordinators described their duties as that of a "mini-principal." When it became apparent that many small learning coordinators were not providing instructional leadership, some cluster leaders pressed principals to redefine their roles and responsibilities. But this proved difficult to do, in part because of the magnitude of the administrative and discipline tasks in Philadelphia middle schools, but also because the selection and training of most small learning coordinators had

focused on a different set of skills — managing student discipline and coordinating administrative duties.

Furthermore, small learning communities did not become the kind of professional communities where teachers regularly analyzed their practice — in large part because of the chaotic staffing conditions that characterized middle schools. While on paper middle school faculties were successful in establishing the organizational, enabling structures for small learning communities, in the turbulent reality of middle schools, these supports were often a house of cards. For example, although teachers were initially able to decide who would work with whom, choice became meaningless as teacher turnover rates in middle schools soared and as, in the words of one principal, schools scrambled to "find bodies to cover classrooms." One new teacher shrugged and explained, "I was assigned to fill an empty space." Teachers were concerned about philosophical and pedagogical mismatches. Furthermore, teachers questioned the legitimacy of a community in which members were added or subtracted at the will of the administration. According to one teacher:

Every year we hold our breath that one of us won't be taken from our community. And we are a community!...Sometimes a teacher who doesn't share our philosophy will get put here. Arbitrarily assigning people [to SLCs] goes against [concept of] community...[It is] one of the most upsetting things...[They should] try to place people with similar outlooks together. We can request placement; it's generally honored but not always, [it] affects the way things work.

Similarly, common meeting time frequently evaporated because substitute teachers were not available. As a result, classroom teachers had to forfeit their preparation periods or common planning time to cover the classrooms of their absent colleagues. One researcher observed:

On three consecutive Wednesdays, I arrived for the small learning community meeting. Each time, the meeting was 'cancelled.' I suspect that rather than being cancelled, meetings simply do not occur with any regularity. It appears that most meetings between the coordinator and staff are informal and happen on the fly. There are few formal opportunities for the entire community to gather for discussion and exchange of ideas.[47]

The instability in staffing left middle school teachers with a sense of perpetually starting over, rather than shifting into smaller, more intimate, and more stable teaching contexts.

The District-mandated Comprehensive Support Process (CSP) also played a role in undermining the development of small learning communities. Middle school teachers and small learning community coordinators were just beginning to wrestle with the differences between houses and small learning communities when the CSP was introduced in 1999. The CSP was a group process aimed at designing

[47] Researcher's field notes, 2000.

instructional supports for students struggling academically. Philadelphia leaders designed the CSP as the primary mechanism for ensuring that all students reached high standards. The CSP had two goals. The first was to help teachers design instructional interventions that would meet the needs of students who were struggling academically. The second was to ensure that teachers did not make hasty recommendations that such students be tested for assignment to special education. The CSP required teachers to document a student's learning difficulties, meet with SLC colleagues to discuss potential classroom interventions, implement the agreed-upon strategies, document their efficacy, and reflect on the process with their SLC colleagues. If progress was not made, the teacher might then recommend the student for diagnostic testing.

The Comprehensive Support Process overwhelmed middle school small learning communities at a critical moment in their development. SLC coordinators reported that when a SLC took the Comprehensive Support Process seriously, teachers found themselves spending all of their common meeting time on the CSP. Some small learning communities abandoned the CSP altogether, and individual teachers just filled out the paperwork as if they had collaborated with their colleagues. In general, teachers resented the CSP. Most believed that it was designed to deny students support services in order to save the District money. One coordinator said:

The CSP doesn't differentiate. You can't get a really troubled kid who is failing, making his teacher miserable, and interfering with the whole class's learning, the help he needs quickly. You have to go through all the steps. It's ridiculous.

The other unintended consequence of the CSP was that it focused teachers' attention on individual students' learning difficulties to the neglect of instructional strategies that would move entire groups of students to higher levels of achievement.

This is not to say that no SLC made effective use of the Comprehensive Support Process. At Abbott Middle School, staff decided that the primary purpose of small learning communities was to tailor instruction to meet individual and group needs. SLCs did not have themes and therefore there was more time available for the Comprehensive Support Process. Additionally, Abbott teachers came to the CSP with several years of experience using structured processes to look at student work. Under these circumstances the CSP offered an additional tool for thinking about what it takes to get as many students as possible to achieve at high levels. But, for the most part, small learning community coordinators were ill prepared to lead the Comprehensive Support Process and teachers' misconceptions about it limited its effectiveness as an intervention to support students academically.

In the end, small learning communities had a strong impact on improving student discipline and the overall

school environment, but they were a lost opportunity as a support and catalyst for continuous professional learning and strong professional community — both of which are foundational to helping teachers rethink and revise their practice.

ABBOTT MIDDLE SCHOOL: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SUCCESS

Abbott Middle School had the strongest and most consistent educational program that we encountered.[48] Despite significant teacher turnover and four principals during the reform era, Abbott students showed steady gains in all subjects. The school's success was the product of dogged attention to classroom instruction, systematic cultivation of teacher leaders, strategic use of professional development by people from both in and outside the school, and the provision of significant blocks of time for professional development and planning during the school day, after school, on Saturdays, and in the summer. Strong collegial relations were a hallmark of the school. School staff regularly analyzed their teaching and they used structured processes for reviewing student work. Their reflection occurred in their teaching teams, in their small learning communities, in Critical Friends groups, and with coaches provided by Talent Development. A more detailed account follows of how Abbott systematically assembled the building blocks necessary for continuous improvement: effective school leaders that included administrators, teachers, and parents; professional development that drew on expertise from both within and outside the school and almost always focused on the classroom implementation of effective curricula that the school had adopted; and strong professional community that recognized and cultivated the contributions and talents of individual faculty members and held high expectations for students and teachers.

LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO BUILD AN ACADEMICALLY CHALLENGING PROGRAM

Abbott Middle School entered the *Children Achieving* era with a foundation for undertaking the challenges of standards-based reform. It had an active parent group and a well-respected principal who had the support of the community. Although Abbott Middle School underwent repeated changes in building leadership during *Children Achieving*, each of its principals shared a similar vision of how the school could improve student performance. (This continuity of vision was due in large part to the fact that Abbott's local school council played a strong role in selecting each principal and looked for candidates who were likely to build on what had gone before.)

In 1993-1994, the year before Superintendent David Hornbeck arrived in Philadelphia to launch *Children*

[48] In their study of students' experiences in six Philadelphia middle schools, Wilson and Corbett also found that Abbott Middle School distinguished itself. Students reported more consistency in the instruction they received from classroom to classroom and they reported more instances of instructional practices that they believed helped them to learn.

Achieving, Abbott Middle School adopted Talent Development, a whole-school reform model developed by Johns Hopkins University. The impetus for adoption came from the school's principal who had worked with a Johns Hopkins model in her previous elementary school assignment. It also was the result of difficult, but productive conversations among the staff over several years. These conversations centered on the question: To what degree do teachers across the school need to be using similar approaches to instruction in order for our students to achieve at high levels? Over time Abbott teachers concluded that they needed to be "on the same page."

All four principals believed that strengthening curricula in the core academic areas was the key to improving student achievement. For this reason, they maintained the focus on Talent Development and other programs aimed directly at subject area curricula. This meant that Abbott's staff picked and chose what it attended to in the *Children Achieving* reforms. For example, unlike faculties in other middle schools, Abbott teachers did not look to small learning communities as the primary strategy for instructional improvement. One principal explained:

Our school thrust is an academically challenging program. There are no differences in small learning communities. Our staff felt that each small learning community should have the same rigorous standards and that it was too early to limit youngsters to one career or theme. This year we're giving a lot of attention to our math sequence, going over topics to make sure our kids will be ready for algebra in eighth grade.[49]

This strategy paid off for Abbott.

TALENT DEVELOPMENT: THE CENTERPIECE FOR WHOLE-SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Talent Development had several components that were highly appealing to Abbott parents and faculty: a core curriculum in the major subject areas, professional development sessions on how to use Talent Development's core curriculum, a teaching coach assigned to work with the school faculty, career-awareness strands for students, and intensive remediation for students who were falling behind.

Abbott teachers worked with Talent Development coaches to map curriculum topics for reading/English/language arts, mathematics, and science. Talent Development's core curriculum filled a gap that many believed was missing in the District's reform plan. In the first year of implementation, Abbott teachers also began participating in Saturday professional development sessions in the Talent Development language arts curriculum. Another subject area was added in each year of implementation. Because there was such high teacher turnover at the school, professional development from previous years was repeated. The sessions offered a consistent forum where Abbott teachers could meet and talk about the core curriculum. They also provided

[49] Principal interview, spring 1997.

much-needed support for the school's many new and inexperienced teachers. As Abbott teachers became increasingly skilled in using the Talent Development curriculum, they assumed more responsibility for training and coaching their colleagues.

INNOVATIVE USES OF TIME AND STAFF

In 1997, Abbott began "banking time" which allowed for a 1:15 p.m. dismissal once a month; on these days teachers were paid to stay at school until 5:00 p.m. This provided a four-hour block of time for small learning communities and teaching teams to plan and for extended professional development sessions. In 1999-2000, the school used its Chapter I funding to hire a substitute teacher. This substitute provided coverage so classroom teachers could visit teacher leaders' classrooms to observe demonstration lessons. The substitute also covered classrooms of teacher leaders who participated in summer technology training under a cluster grant from IBM.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION INITIATIVES ENHANCE TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND NURTURE TEACHER LEADERS

Several Abbott teachers became Philadelphia Urban Systemic Initiative teacher leaders. The Philadelphia Urban Systemic Initiative in Mathematics and Science (PHUSI), a five-year (1995-2000) effort funded by the National Science Foundation, was designed to improve the mathematics and science achievement of all students in the District. The primary improvement strategies were to provide exemplary curriculum materials to teachers and to develop a cadre of teacher leaders in every school who could help their colleagues adopt these challenging new curricula. The PHUSI teacher leaders at Abbott received additional support and training in implementing the science and math curricula adopted by the school and participated in the District-wide network of PHUSI teacher leaders. They provided turn-around training for other teachers at the school. In addition, the science teacher leaders developed science units based on the Franklin Institute science kits and offered their colleagues classroom support in how to use the units.

Abbott was also part of an IBM grant that supported teachers in integrating technology into multidisciplinary, project-based learning. Teachers attended intensive summer professional development in which they developed their own learning projects. They experienced firsthand what it meant to incorporate technology into an independent learning project and were thus well prepared to coach their students in the development of such projects when they returned to their classroom. Again, IBM teacher leaders at Abbott served as models for their peers who observed in their classrooms.

COALITION OF ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS: STRUCTURED PROCESSES FOR ANALYZING TEACHING AND REVIEWING STUDENT WORK

A core group of teachers and three of Abbott's four principals were active in the Coalition of Essential Schools'

national faculty. Some found the Coalition on their own; others began participating when encouraged to do so by their cluster leader. Abbott staff traveled to Coalition national conferences where they participated in portfolio reviews of their practice. Two principals and several teachers became national leaders. As a result of their involvement, these staff members established and invited their colleagues to join Critical Friends groups at the school. The Critical Friends groups introduced a variety of structured processes for reflection on teaching practice. These processes became useful tools for small learning community meetings, faculty retreats, and other sessions. They offered structures that were sorely missing in meetings we observed at other schools. They also directed attention at the heart of the educational enterprise — teaching and learning — rather than at the administrative trivia that can so easily dominate teacher meetings.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: MS. P. TALKS ABOUT HER TEACHING

In the spring of 1999, Ms. P., an Abbott teacher, described the changes she had made in her classroom practice during *Children Achieving* and what influenced those changes. Her story points to how the steps detailed above came together in one teacher's practice and helped Ms. P. find ways to assist students, who were performing poorly, gain the skills necessary to master more challenging academic material.

I concentrate more on the students' learning than my teaching. I'm more of a risk-taker than before. I focus on making certain my students master skills and I've learned lots of different ways for them to demonstrate their understanding.

Now I teach to the higher-ability group in the class and then find ways to support other students so that they can reach this level. In the past I taught to the middle group in the class. But now I understand that if you teach to the top group or higher-ability group, you can provide scaffolding strategies to bring all the students to this level. I've put together different learning packets on a wide range of levels that I can give to students who are experiencing difficulty. I believe in Vygotsky's philosophy and zones of learning. I create activities and scaffolding to support each student's progress.

Talent Development and our staff's work on reading and language arts have been very important influences on my practice. I value inquiry-based instruction. Talent Development and the school's approach to literacy have emphasized the importance of inquiry. I find what I need for my own professional learning from these initiatives and I feel rewarded from the collegial interaction and support we have in this school.[58]

IN SUMMARY

In Philadelphia, conditions in middle schools were extremely difficult, exacerbated by high turnover in staff. A strong principal and leadership team and well-functioning small learning communities were essential in the

[58] Researcher's field notes and teacher interview, 1999.

Children Achieving plan to establishing and maintaining a school climate in which teaching and learning might potentially become the central focus of attention. However, a smoothly functioning school did not in and of itself guarantee that a school made substantive instructional changes. Building organizational capacity in schools requires that effective school leadership, a strong professional community, and opportunities for professional development were present and/or supported. But in Philadelphia, these components were evident in few middle schools and resources to support the development of any of these three areas were minimal at best.

Over the course of *Children Achieving*, some middle school principals assumed stronger roles in setting school instructional priorities. They increased their use of student performance data provided by the District to inform instructional decisions. However, most middle school leaders were unable to craft effective whole-school change strategies that were aimed directly at improving classroom instruction. Often overwhelmed by what was being asked of them and lacking a big picture of how the many pieces of the reform plan were supposed to fit together, principals focused on making structural changes in the form of small learning communities and investing in narrowly focused efforts to raise test scores. The turbulence of the middle school environment — student discipline and staff turnover — posed significant obstacles. And principals received little support from either the district offices or central administration.

In general, principals did not have a vision for how to create a school culture based on continuous professional learning. At best, they saw their job as putting the necessary structures in place to support small learning communities, mentoring their small learning community coordinators into the role of "mini-principal," and reviewing test score data to see what areas needed attention. They did not see the professional development of teachers as their responsibility and they did not understand that there was more to creating a professional culture of collaboration and collegial learning than scheduling an hour a week for small learning community meetings.

EDWARDS MIDDLE SCHOOL VIGNETTE: TROUBLED ENVIRONMENT AND SCATTERED IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

Student Attendance: Percent of students attending 90 percent of days or more in 1996 and 85 percent of days or more in 2000

	1996	2000
Edwards Middle School	61.9	70.4
Middle School Average	69.2	72.0

Promotion Rate: (in percents)

	1996	2000
Edwards Middle School	78.2	80.1
Middle School Average	81.5	84.8

Staff Attendance: Percent of staff attending 95 percent of days or more

	1996	2000
Edwards Middle School	39.8	30.0
Middle School Average	52.1	58.4

Students' SAT-9 scores at or above basic

	1996	2000
Reading	43.1	43.4
Math	17.0	8.5
Science	12.3	19.2

The Edwards Middle School enrolled 1,100 students; 86 percent were from low-income family backgrounds. The student body was 99 percent African American. Of the five schools described in this report, Edwards had the most negative school climate — with low teacher morale, poor teacher/administration relationships, and frequently chaotic hallways and classrooms. When *Children Achieving* began the school had had eight principals in the previous 10 years and the staff turnover rate was one of the highest in the city. Edwards did not meet its performance targets in the first accountability cycle. Every change the school undertook encountered serious challenges. Small learning communities served to further fracture faculty relationships. The cluster mandated that the school affiliate with a technology-based national reform model, but Edwards did not have the necessary Internet hook-up in classrooms and few teachers were interested. Veteran staff members shunned professional development offered by the Teaching and Learning Network; new teachers benefited little from the smorgasbord of unrelated topics. Although Edwards students made dramatic gains in the second accountability cycle, the increases could not be sustained and in the third cycle scores in reading improved negligibly and in math, scores actually declined.

SYSTEMIC REFORM IN PHILADELPHIA MIDDLE SCHOOLS: LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

As a result of the major reform initiatives under *Children Achieving*, Philadelphia middle school teachers faced an enormous challenge. Increased public scrutiny, new assessments, development of new curricula in every subject, new demands for professional development, new work arrangements, and new procedures for obtaining support services for students were among the many changes faced by middle school staffs. Our research focused on how these demands influenced teachers' instructional practices and therefore what students learned.

We found that the beliefs and concerns of middle school teachers and principals powerfully influenced how they interpreted the messages of the reform and responded to its initiatives. They wanted their students to recognize the benefits of education and to take their school work more seriously. The new accountability system, and the accompanying tests, loomed large. Teachers' perceptions of their students as unmotivated learners and unsophisticated test takers convinced them to maximize incentives to encourage students to take the District's standardized assessment seriously and to engage in extensive test preparation in their classrooms.

Middle school teachers and principals also believed that small learning communities were a good match for their students and schools. The development of thematic curricula linked to the new small learning communities signaled to staff that the reform was under way in their schools. However, our research indicated that the thematic curricula developed in Philadelphia's middle schools often did not offer rigorous learning experiences for students.

Middle school leaders focused on smoothly running schools. They were very concerned about student discipline and student attitudes. They wanted their schools to be safe and orderly. Their priorities were the establishment of small learning communities and efficient leadership teams that maintained stable school climates. Principals monitored SAT-9 test data and other information related to the Performance Responsibility Index and communicated this priority to staff. But few principals knew how to craft improvement strategies that were robust enough to support teachers' efforts to make the major transformation in practice demanded by standards. They had a limited understanding of the role of professional communities and continuous professional learning in improving classroom instruction and thus student achievement. When some middle school leaders attempted to pursue long-term strategies aimed at improving subject-area teaching, they encountered serious obstacles, most notably teacher turnover and the inadequate subject matter preparation of many of their teachers.

Accountability, standards, and decentralization were the critical levers of change in *Children Achieving's* theory of action. They were powerful ideas but in Philadelphia's middle schools, they produced superficial changes in curriculum and instruction and only modest gains in student achievement. Why did standards-based reforms fall so short of their intended outcomes in Philadelphia? Below we offer some lessons drawn from our research.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The underlying assumption that the new accountability system and its accompanying assessment would drive classroom instruction proved correct. To their credit, teachers wanted their students to perform well on the tests and they did not want the stigma of "low progress" to hang over their schools. However, the accountability system drove instruction in different directions that depended on the varying capacities of the schools and staffs. Unfortunately, in many classrooms this meant that students were engaged in the worst form of drill and kill test preparation.

The accountability system served as an impetus for middle school staffs to consider educational innovations that they previously might have discounted as too ambitious, too much trouble, and/or too costly. For example, at four of the five schools in our qualitative sample, teachers elected to adopt whole-school reform models. Middle school principals believed that the accountability system acted as an incentive for teachers to be more open to seeking and using expertise and support from outside their schools.

STANDARDS

The Philadelphia standards offered insufficient instructional guidance to middle school teachers. Reform leaders belatedly recognized this and created additional supports — the Curriculum Frameworks, the Comprehensive Support Process, and new requirements for promotion including multi-disciplinary and service learning projects — to guide teachers' decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The District's leaders believed that these reforms were well-aligned and were reinforcing catalysts for substantive instructional changes. In practice, however, they often seemed to be disconnected initiatives and they overburdened school staff. Principals, in particular, reeled from the sheer number of changes.

Potentially the content standards might have provided the conceptual framework for a serious review of the middle school curriculum, challenging middle school teachers to think deeply about their students' intellectual growth. However, the high-stakes accountability system focused teachers on the content of the SAT-9. Learning to respond to the kinds of questions that were on the tests became more important than developing challenging curricula. In addition, classroom-based assessments never became a priority and very few teachers routinely reviewed student work against the standards.

DECENTRALIZATION

The combination of decentralization and standards-based reform proved to be incompatible. The instructional changes envisioned by the architects of the reforms were very challenging. Teachers and principals did not know how to create constructivist learning environments in middle school classrooms or how to build small learning communities and local school councils, contexts in which professional learning and educational innovations might flourish. They fell back on their previous experiences with houses and leadership teams, trusting the familiar and comfortable, rather than embracing the new and the ambitious. Additionally, District, cluster, and school leaders overburdened small learning communities with mandates for student discipline, thematic curriculum, the Comprehensive Support Process, and partnerships with outside agencies and did not use the small learning communities and thematic curriculum and instruction to stimulate or support the development of standards-driven curriculum and instruction.

IN CONCLUSION

Our research suggests that even systemic reform must be custom-tailored. Reform leaders must craft strategies for improvement that are well suited to, for example, the different levels of schooling and the varying capacities of teachers and schools. They must take into consideration what has gone before and help school staff examine how what is being asked of them is different and what it will take to get from where they are to where they need to go. A second lesson from our research is that it is not enough to specify the ends. The initial lack of guidance in Philadelphia about curriculum and pedagogy resulted in the widespread use of test preparation materials that were not integrated with the standards or the envisioned classroom curricula.

The next phase of instructional improvement in Philadelphia's middle schools will be difficult. It will require a monumental effort on several fronts simultaneously: establishing predictable and safe educational environments in which teachers can provide effective opportunities for learning, developing networks of school leaders who know what needs to be done to improve student achievement and know how to do it, providing model curricula that can be adopted or adapted for immediate use, and building a foundation for professional community among teachers. Finally, it will require a major transformation in school culture so that teachers come to see their young adolescent students both as intellectual beings capable of meeting academic challenges as well as social beings in need of nurturing and a sense of belonging.

The District and school staff, in cooperation with the larger community, will need to develop strategies to: overcome the monumental staffing issues in the middle schools; identify curricula that are coherent, intellectually demanding, engaging, and offer a depth currently absent in many classrooms; help teachers develop classroom assessments that provide evidence of whether students have

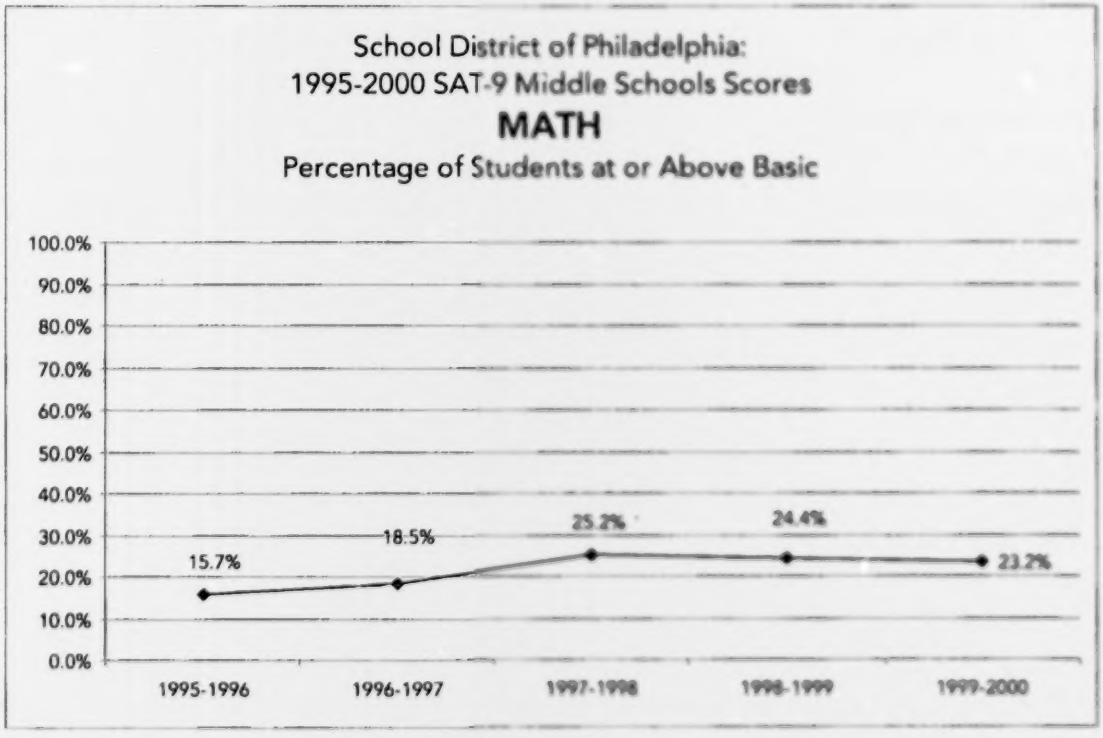
mastered concepts and skills; and find or develop sources of in-depth content-based professional development that includes classroom-based coaching.

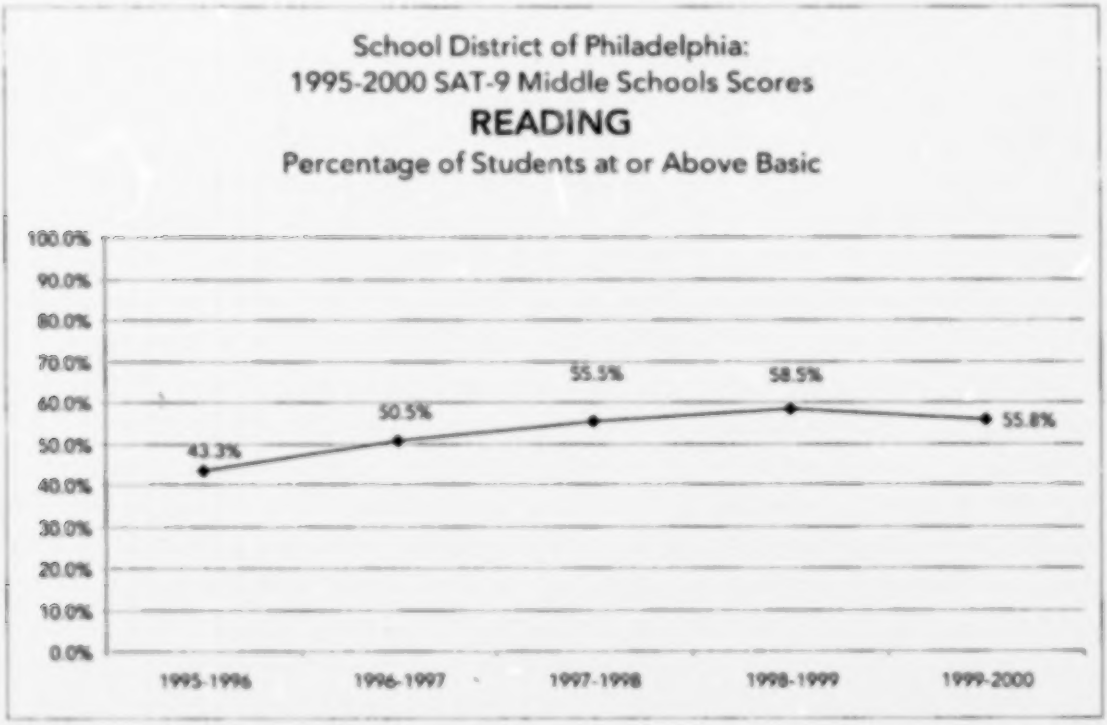
APPENDIX

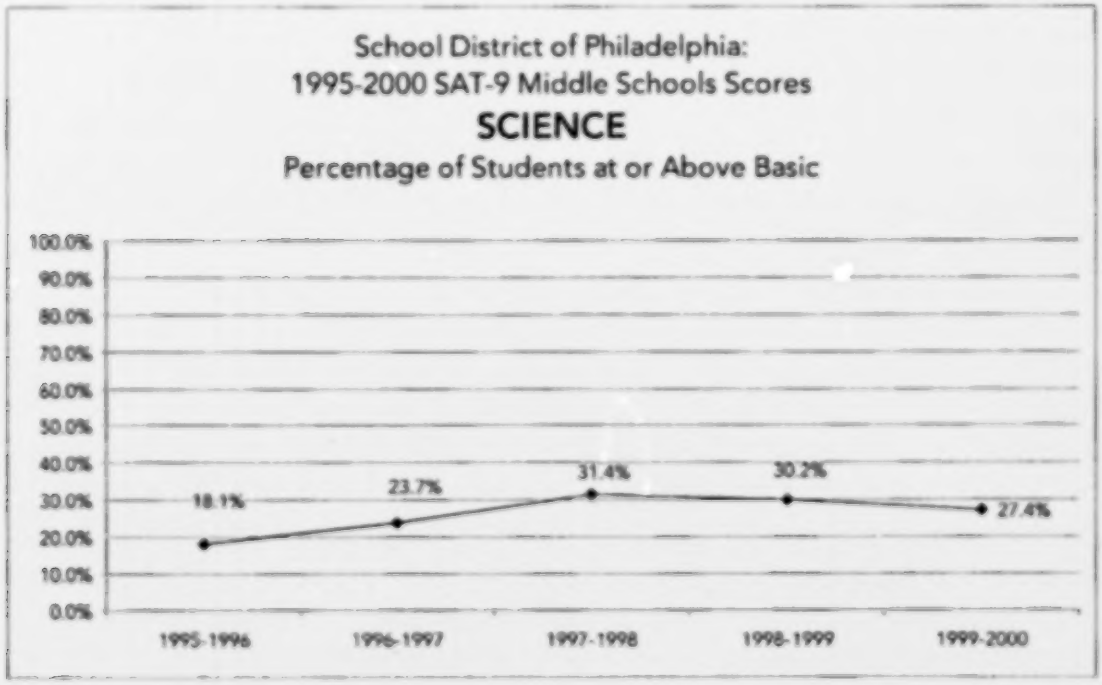
Profile of Five Middle Schools in the Intensive Qualitative Sample, 1999-2000

School	Years in Study	# of Students 1998-1999	Race/Ethnicity					% of Low-income Students	# of Principals 1996-1997 through 1999-2000	Teacher Turnover Rate* 1998-99
			African American	Asian	Latino	Native American	White			
Middle Schools										
Abbott	5	1,131	29.0	12.0	48.0	00.0	11.0	87	4	61
Baker	2	992	80.0	12.0	07.0	00.2	00.8	90	2	39
Cooper	3	1,179	18.0	04.0	32.0	00.5	45.0	92	2	22
Dutton	2	1,174	99.0	00.3	00.7	00.2	00.3	80	2	37
Edwards	2	1,053	99.0	00.1	00.1	00.0	00.6	86	2	44

* *Data taken from The School District of Philadelphia, December 16, 1999 Memorandum of Teacher Transfers and Faculty Stability Memorandum.*




School District of Philadelphia:
1995-2000 SAT-9 Middle Schools Scores
READING
Percentage of Students at or Above Basic
100.0%
90.0%
80.0%
70.0%
60.0%
50.0%
40.0%
30.0%
20.0%
10.0%
0.0%
43.3%
50.5%
55.5%
58.5%
55.8%
1995-1996
1996-1997
1997-1998
1998-1999
1999-2000


School District of Philadelphia:
1995-2000 SAT-9 Middle Schools Scores
SCIENCE
Percentage of Students at or Above Basic
100.0%
90.0%
80.0%
70.0%
60.0%
50.0%
40.0%
30.0%
20.0%
10.0%
0.0%
18.1%
23.7%
31.4%
30.2%
27.4%
1995-1996
1996-1997
1997-1998
1998-1999
1999-2000

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